



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE”

Scripture Lesson: John 14:15-19; 15:1-11

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, May 18, 2008.

Today the message from God’s word will be delivered through the medium of music as well as this brief sermon. Thus I am prompted to ask: Is there one medium more sacred than another, or better suited to communicating God’s word in worship? Of course, every message has a medium. It may be written or oral or expressed by any of the arts. In fact, the gospels even suggest that a message or a word can be incarnated or fleshed out in the medium of a person. Some media communicate best to left brained persons and others to right brained recipients. To be sure we are all wired differently.

I raise this issue because occasionally someone steeped in Reformed worship and liturgy where the preached word is so central will ask: Is it ever appropriate to eliminate a sermon from a service of worship, even if you are offering a wonderful choral work in the same service? My answer is that a sermon delivered orally is only one medium for communicating God’s message despite its historic significance for Presbyterian and Reformed Christians. So while we may have terms of communication that we personally prefer and media that communicates better to us than other media, we must recognize that there is more than one suitable medium for expressing God’s word.

But of course, the medium matters. It matters a great deal and that is why we pursue excellence in crafting the medium, whatever the message may be. The late Marshall McLuhan, guru of culture and communication, went so far as to say “The medium is the message.” I don’t know if I would go quite that far, but surely the medium and the message are almost always mutually dependent. They exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship.

You may be thinking, what does he mean by the word medium in this sense. It could be defined as “a specific kind of artistic technique or means of expression used to communicate a message.” This applies to painting, to preaching, to poetry and to a host of arts that do not begin with the letter “P”, such as choral music. From my perspective a sermon is or ought to be just another art form.

Augustine argued that a sermon could serve any of three purposes --- to teach, to delight, and/or to persuade. Teaching appeals to the mind; delighting to the heart; and persuading to the will. A choral music offering can also do any or all of these things as well. But if you have a message of substance to deliver, then refining and perfecting the medium enables the message to speak more effectively to the mind, the heart, and the will and also makes the message memorable.

Surely we all recognize that how something is said is often as important as what is said. “Honey, do you mind if we just have leftovers again tonight? I didn’t feel like stopping by the store.” “I guess not.” The message may have said one thing but the tone and the body language, the medium, said quite another.

The medium not only helps to communicate the message but it can also make it memorable and powerful as well. In Lerner and Loewe's musical "Camelot", Robert Goulet sings a lovely ballad:

"If ever I would leave you
It wouldn't be in summer.
Seeing you in summer I never would go.
Your hair streaked with sun-light,
Your lips red as flame,
Your face with a luster
That puts gold to shame!

But if I'd ever leave you,
It couldn't be in autumn.
How I'd leave in autumn I never will know.
I've seen how you sparkle
When fall nips the air.
I know you in autumn
And I must be there.

And could I leave you
Running merrily through the snow?
Or on a wintry evening
When you catch the fire's glow?

If ever I would leave you,
How could it be in spring-time?
Knowing how in spring I'm bewitched by you so?
Oh, no! not in spring time!
Summer, winter of fall!
No, never could I leave you at all!

Now as the ladies here wipe a tear from their eye let me explain to the men present that even though the message would be the same no one would have remembered if Robert Goulet had simply walked out on stage and announced, "I'm not going anywhere."

Jesus of Nazareth was perhaps the world's best raconteur and communicator. He was a master teacher and preacher because he not only incarnated God's word but he made that word vital and powerful and memorable by using words and expressions, body language and I am sure tones and inflections that appealed to the mind, the heart, the will, and the memory. He was a poetic preacher and teacher and knew how to turn a phrase so that the message reached the recipient and was remembered years later.

I fear that some people take our Lord's words with such a wooden literalness that they ignore the medium and often miss the message. They argue that we ought to be able to say clearly without equivocation precisely what Jesus meant and intended with everything he spoke, thus removing something of the mystery and the majesty of his message.

In a few moments we will gather once again at the table of our Lord. This Eucharistic meal instituted by our Lord was intended to help us remember him and his sacrificial love but also to help

unify his disciples and connect them to one another after he was crucified and risen. Sadly the Eucharist has become perhaps the greatest obstacle to Christian unity in all the world. We have spent untold ink and blood trying to explain the inexplicable and trying to correct those who interpret the sacrament differently than we do. The Catholics do not agree with the Lutherans, who do not agree with the Zwinglians and Calvinists who do not agree with the Anabaptists. So regrettably the Lord's disciples from differing branches of Christendom can not even sit down at table together in remembrance of their one Lord.

All of us basically have the same words in scripture but not the same medium or message. "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you." He said this according to some so it must be literally true or else we make him out a liar. Now I hate to quote Bill Clinton but there is some truth to what he said that what is communicated often depends on what "is" *is*? "This is my body." Is can mean equals. But is can also mean represents or symbolizes.

In today's lesson Jesus declares, "I am the vine, you are the branches." How literally or figuratively ought we to take these words? Was he using a metaphor to communicate a figurative but not a literal truth? I think so. He was saying that we will not be abandoned or orphaned when he is gone away but his life through his spirit will flow in us and through us as we abide in him and in his word. And what a comfort and encouragement this is for every disciple here today. We dare to believe that our Lord is present with us at this table even as he is present in us by his spirit. And yet this remains a mystery that we will never fully or finally articulate but one that we dare to believe and commend to others.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.