



by Sally A. Brown

Whatever our assessment of the musical merits of the hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone,” it could be said to be the anthem of 21st-century Anglo-Protestant spirituality. Frankly, meeting Jesus in the garden alone can be attractive when coming to church means dealing with the annoying range of personalities, theological and political opinions, habits, and tastes that God has seen fit to call together as the church. (Although recent defenders of the hymn’s theology point out that it is intended to evoke the resurrection appearance to Mary in the burial garden on Easter morning, the hymn’s text omits Jesus’ commissioning of Mary to go back to the *gathered community* of disciples to preach the good news, thus severing personal encounter with Jesus from its ecclesial context.)

It may be no accident that, in these recent decades marked by controversy in every major denomination, we have also seen Protestants turning in unprecedented numbers to spiritual training centers to learn classic individual spiritual practices of silence, contemplative prayer, *lectio divina*, and journaling. How quickly we forget that those who developed these disciplines assumed the backdrop of a life of *daily corporate worship*.

The people to whom we preach today are highly influenced by a culture of individualism. Shaped by the Enlightenment “turn to the self,” as well as by American frontier revivalism, many understand Christian spirituality in fundamentally individualistic terms—as a matter between the self and God. By contrast, the Reformed tradition insists, distinctively *Christian* spirituality

Preaching That Fosters “Ecclesial” Identity

is irreducibly corporate and communal—in short, *ecclesial*—spirituality. (Such an understanding of Christian identity is already in place in many African American and Latino/a congregations in North America, where Christian spirituality has always been understood as fundamentally communal.) A major challenge for preachers today is to help those in our pews develop a genuinely ecclesial sense of Christian identity and spirituality.

How can preachers challenge tendencies, fostered by the culture at large, toward spiritual individualism that sees congregational worship and witness as voluntary and even optional? How can we develop a congregation’s ecclesial sensibilities?

First, the preacher can cast an eye over recent sermons to see whether she or he has tended to choose stories and illustrations that reinforce individualistic images of Christian spirituality. Stories in a sermon work analogously with the dynamics of the biblical text, grabbing the listener by the imagination so that the *pro me* of the gospel is heard. But if most stories focus on *individual* experience (as does much of the material traded on preachers’ lectionary web sites these days), the cultural bias toward individualistic spirituality is reinforced.

Preachers can expand their storytelling repertoire to include stories of the church—the *community* bearing witness, the *church* challenged and transformed. Congregations need to hear the story of the church through history and around the world, as well as the congregation’s own story, or that of a sister congregation across town.

A second strategy for developing ecclesial consciousness in the pews is by reviving the practice of *mystagogical catechesis*, or preaching on the sacraments. Such instruction was normative in the ancient church in the Paschal season when it was urgently important to instruct Easter baptisands in their new ecclesial identity. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, understood rightly, signify that those in the pews with us are actually *indispensable* to our Christian formation.

Of course, first we may have to cut our way through a thicket of false assumptions about the meaning of the sacraments. Baptism is too often understood as a punctiliar act in which the taint of original sin is expunged and individuals are branded, so to speak, so as to be sorted into the right pile at their demise, rather than as an act that roots us in the life of the *ecclesia* through identification with Christ’s death and rising, and commissions us to ministry. The Lord’s Supper, for many, is still a private penitential transaction between oneself and one’s God, rather than participation in the eschatological community inaugurated in Jesus Christ. Reclaiming the corporate dimensions of these signs and promises breaks open their socially transformative potential.

Admittedly, preaching on the sacraments is bound to be less compelling if these rites are only a peripheral part of congregational experience. With interrupted worship attendance patterns more the norm than the exception these days, quarterly celebrations of the Lord’s Supper or occasional baptisms are often as not missed, making them a footnote to Christian experience, rather than the font of Christian identity and ecclesial consciousness. The sacraments remind us, especially in contentious times, that finally we are the church with and for each other not by mutual contract, but by virtue of a divine act and promise.

Some observers note that the as-you-like-it spirituality of the 1990s has left many adrift, searching for ritual and community. Congregations with a strong sense of ecclesial identity will be living signs of God’s redemptive work and profoundly good news to this generation of seekers. ■

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