**Preaching with Empathy – Lenny Luchetti**

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**Excerpts and Memes**

There is another love necessary for preaching to reach its full potential for societal transformation— love for those to whom we preach. It’s not enough to get the biblical text, sermon form, and delivery right; the preacher must also get the listeners “right.”

-Introduction

Empathy gives preachers the capacity, the grace really, to put themselves into the shoes of their congregants so that they think and feel what their people think and feel. Empathy makes mediocre preaching better, and good preaching great. Without empathy, preachers cannot begin to fully know and love the people to whom they preach.

-Introduction

*Preaching with Empathy* joins together what has too often been torn asunder in order to connect preachers at a more meaningful level with the people in their care. This work brings together an array of interdisciplinary conversation partners, including homiletics, theology, sociology, philosophy, history, and neurology. But this is no theoretical text; it is an unapologetically practical tool for preachers who want to become better people as they preach better sermons.

-Introduction

*Preaching with Empathy* is for seasoned preachers who want a “shot in the arm” to heighten their passion for the God they proclaim and the people to whom they make God known. Pastors in the grind of ministry challenges should find much in this volume to immediately employ in their preaching. *Preaching with Empathy* is also written for professors and students of homiletics who are seeking a resource that is theologically thoughtful, discipline-inclusive, and practically useful.

-Introduction

Preaching with empathy is a spiritual art that cannot be reduced to a mechanical technique. I’m convinced, however, that a careful and prayerful reading will increase your empathy and enable you to craft empathic sermons in a callous culture. A preacher who is filled with divine empathy will preach sermons that move heaven and earth. That I *can* guarantee.

-Introduction

What does empathy have to do with preaching? Everything. Homiletic empathy is the grace that enables preachers to imagine their way into the situational shoes of others, to understand the thoughts and feel the emotions of listeners. Only then can they preach in a manner most responsive to their listeners’ deepest needs. Homiletic empathy bridges the chasm between the preacher and the ethnically, generationally, educationally, economically, geographically, and spiritually diverse people to whom he or she preaches. Empathy turns a bible study into a sermon. Empathy transforms information into impact. Empathy enables intimacy between pulpit and pew. Yes, empathy matters!

-Chapter 2: A Case for Homiletic Empathy

In a cultural context of anger and apathy that results in callousness, a context in which the church has lost her power and privilege, how does the Christian preacher get a hearing? The present age demands not only exegesis or eloquence, but empathy. The preacher who embodies with words and manner, in content and delivery, the empathy of God for the human race will preach with amplified power. Empathy makes the homiletical world go round.

-Chapter 2: A Case for Homiletic Empathy

Evidence suggests a disconnect between the pulpit and pew, the preacher and the people. The preacher still talks and the people still listen, but for empathy’s sake the preacher must find a way to listen to the people talk….The preacher is not only a bold prophet who represents God to people, but an empathic priest who represents people to God. The priest preaches to intercede, advocate, atone, confess, and articulate for people. The prophetic *and* priestly roles are required in the preacher or the congregation will become lopsided toward truth or grace and miss the beautiful blend of both. Sermonic words must not only be faithful to the will and way of God (prophet), but to the hopes and hurts of humanity (priest). As we preach, people must feel as if we’re articulating for them what they feel, know, and hope for but can’t voice themselves. Listeners are most impacted not by eloquent or entertaining preachers, but empathic ones. The empathic preacher puts to words for me what I feel deep in my soul but can’t articulate.

-Chapter 2: A Case for Homiletic Empathy

The best preachers are not the best talkers but the best listeners. They sit and listen to the heart of humanity. Then, on Sundays they stand and deliver a word that shows the scars of soul-level listening. The deep in the pulpit cries out to the deep in the pews. “Deep calls to deep” (Psalm 42:7a).

-Chapter 2: A Case for Homiletic Empathy

Jesus embodied and emphasized empathy. He lived it and longed for it in others. Empathy is not about being nice or harmonious. Jesus’ empathy drove him to seek freedom and justice for all, even if it meant going into the temple and boldly confronting injustice. His empathy liberated and dignified people, particularly those on the societal margins. He empathically bridged the huge chasm of distance between divinity and humanity. Preachers are summoned by this empathic God to do the same through the practice of Christian preaching.

-Chapter 3: Empathic God

Preachers need to take our cues from God. We do this when we allow the needs of the people to whom we preach to shape why, what, and how we preach, even if outside of the box of our stylistic preferences.

-Chapter 3: Empathic God

The preacher must become a person of empathy in the quest to preach with empathy. Trying to preach with empathy before practicing empathy is putting the ministry cart before the spiritual horse. Preaching with empathy is more of a spiritual art and exercise than a rhetorical skill. Real empathy is fluid and organic, not static and contrived. The good news is that while empathy cannot be forced or faked, it can be cultivated through intentional and consistent practices.

-Chapter 5: Practices for Cultivating Empathy in Preachers

Empathy growth will enhance just about every area of the preacher’s life- friendship, marriage, parenting, ministry, and health. To put it bluntly, the people around you will like you more when you love them empathically.

-Chapter 5: Practices for Cultivating Empathy in Preachers

Empathic pastors envision a diverse congregation as a beautiful reflection of our Trinitarian God. Pastoral and congregational empathy for “the other,” embodied in the Trinity from eternity, is the premier tool enabling the Church to seize the opportunity presented by diversity. Empathy makes cross-cultural ministry not only possible but probably. Only when we empathically take the perspective of diverse people, understanding their thoughts and feelings, can we authentically “become all things to all people.”

-Chapter 5: Practices for Cultivating Empathy in Preachers

The preaching life is joy-filled but emotionally, spiritually, and physically rigorous. There’s no escaping this double-edged homiletic sword. It cuts both ways. When preachers experience more rigor than joy for a prolonged period, they burnout. The exhausted preacher robotically goes through the motions of developing and delivering sermons. Preaching becomes a task done *for* instead of *with* God and the church. On the other hand, preachers who maintain their empathic connection to God and to people while engaged in the rigors of the homiletic process are likely to experience an increase in joy and ministry tenure.

-Chapter 5: Practices for Cultivating Empathy in Preachers

Just like a healthy weight loss program, empathy growth is often incremental. Becoming a more empathic person takes time and lots of baby steps, but it can happen. The cultivation of empathy, however, happens intentionally not accidentally.

-Chapter 5: Practices for Cultivating Empathy in Preachers

What God does to you, he wants to do through you. Put another way, as you grow in the spiritual grace of empathy be open to the ways God wants to partner with you to cultivate empathy in your congregation. Empathy is the work of the entire Christian community, not just the pastor.

-Chapter 5: Practices for Cultivating Empathy in Preachers

Extreme anger and apathy abound. The United States are currently not so united. We are divided along the boundary lines of politics, race, and economics. Misunderstanding, caricaturing, and stereotyping are norms in this allegedly advanced society. The good news is that what we preachers say and how we say it can offset this trend, assuming we preach with empathy in a callous culture.

-Chapter 6: Practices for Infusing Empathy in Preaching

The preacher listens empathically to the heart of God through Scripture and to the hopes of humanity in context. Then, like a courier who delivers notes between two lovers, the preacher offers theologically faithful and contextually fitting words to reconcile God and people. This kind of sermon is, like Christ, born with divine and human essence all over it.

-Chapter 6: Practices for Infusing Empathy in Preaching

Preaching with empathy comes after listening with empathy to God and people, to the text and the context.

-Chapter 6: Practices for Infusing Empathy in Preaching

Empathic preaching is more of a spiritual and contextual art, than a rhetorical technique. It’s more like making pasta sauce than baking brownies. The brownie recipe is regimented. The instructions on the brownie mix tell you what to add and when to add it. Follow the rules with rigidity or else. I’d rather make pasta sauce than bake brownies. Maybe it’s my Italian heritage, but I love to come up with my own sauces. I will dice up almost anything in the cupboard and fridge- zucchini, squash, black olives, onions, and tomatoes. I will add a dash of soy sauce, cooking wine, oregano, parsley, *Slap Ya Mama* Cajun spice, and pepper. After tasting, I will add another dash of this or that, depending on my mood and, most importantly, the tastes of those for whom I’m cooking. My daughter doesn’t like too much spice. Preaching with empathy is more like creatively making sauce than rigidly baking brownies.

-Chapter 6: Practices for Infusing Empathy in Preaching

Empathy demands both honesty and sensitivity. Preaching with empathy entails speaking to and for people on all sides of a given issue. The voice of the biblical witness has the place of primacy on any topic. We are called to preach “the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help us God.” However, like Christ according to John 1:14, our sermons must embody grace along with truth, without conceding either….Empathically considering multiple vantage points enables the preacher to communicate with Christ-like compassion and winsome grace. Sometimes we preachers proclaim hard, even painful truth in an unnecessarily arrogant, angry, or apathetic manner. These postures in the preacher are met with defensiveness in the listener. But if listeners on all sides of an issue feel as if you “get them,” even if you disagree with their position, they are more likely to hear you and “get God.” The goal of Christian proclamation is not rightness but reconciliation. I’m not suggesting that biblical truth doesn’t matter. It does immensely. All I’m asking for here is that we share the hard truth with people much like a loving mother offers direction to her children.

-Chapter 6: Practices for Infusing Empathy in Preaching

Too many of my preaching colleagues and students suffer under a yoke of sermonic oppression that they need not bear. Admittedly, the preaching life is hard no matter how one lives it. Preaching is rigorous. But the joy is greater and the tenure longer when we practice preaching as a spiritual, contextual, intuitive, and creative art as opposed to a purely rhetorical, generic, detached, and mechanical science. Something happens to and through preachers who empathically bond with God and humanity. They begin to experience the process of developing and delivering sermons with joy, delight, surprise, energy, and freedom. Preaching with empathy makes what we preachers do so worth doing.

-Conclusion