

4-1-1950

Homiletics: Sermon Studies for the New Church Year

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Recommended Citation

Harting, Henry C. (1950) "Homiletics: Sermon Studies for the New Church Year," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 21, Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol21/iss1/28>

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HOMILETICS

A Series of Sermon Studies for the Church Year

CANTATE

MATT. 12:38-42

The Text and the Day.—The text is very appropriate for the post-Easter season. The Introit: "Oh, sing unto the Lord a new song, for He hath done marvelous things. . . . His right hand and His holy arm hath gotten Him the victory"—the resurrection victory over sin, death, and hell.—The Collect: "Grant that our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found." This prayer is necessary in this wicked world in need of being reproved by the Comforter of the sin of unbelief. (Standard Gospel: John 16:5-15.)

Notes on Meaning.—V. 38. Objecting to the signs that Jesus had already performed, the scribes and Pharisees hypocritically made use of the respectful address "Teacher" to demand a sign to see. They were not satisfied with the miracles of mercy, grace, and help for sinners and sufferers thus far performed by the Lord, v. 13 and v. 22. They hankered after something more spectacular, something weird among sun, moon, and stars. They considered the healing of the demoniac a sign from hell, vv. 22-30. Matt. 16:1 reports that they asked for a sign from heaven. It was an unhealthy craving that could not be satisfied.

V. 39. The Lord's answer, as usual, is masterful and authoritative. He characterized his dishonest petitioners as "wicked and adulterous." They had broken their covenant relations with God and committed spiritual adultery by their continued unfaithfulness and resultant hypocrisy and hostility. The sign they wanted was refused them. The Lord directed them to the sign of Jonah. Already early in His ministry the Lord had referred to this sign. John 2:19: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Even the disciples did not understand it then. When the time for the fulfillment of this sign came, the Lord permitted Himself to be captured, mocked, scourged, and put to death on the

Cross. On the third day He rose again. This was the fulfillment of the sign of the Prophet Jonah (Jonah 1:17).

V. 40. Jesus puts the seal of verity upon the historical fact of Jonah's remarkable experience. It was a miracle not only to be swallowed unbroken by a sea monster and to be kept alive in it on three days and three nights, but also to be ejected at the right time to complete his mission at Nineveh, Jonah 2—3. The duration of Jonah's stay in the interior of the great fish, and the repose of Christ in the heart of the earth—Joseph's tomb—are to be understood according to the ancient Jewish reckoning of time.

V. 41. Jesus, the Prophet, gives a word picture of the future judgment. He sees the Jews and the Ninevites standing before Him. The latter repented when they heard nothing but Jonah's preaching of repentance. The former had so much more. They heard Jesus, the Son of God, and saw His miracles of mercy, and still they did not repent.

V. 42. The Queen of Sheba is also seen by Jesus. She came a great distance to hear the wisdom of King Solomon. The Jews heard Him who is more than Solomon, Jesus, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col. 2:3 and 1 Cor. 1:30.) But they would not open their hearts to Him who knocked at their door. All unbelievers will fare like the Pharisees. Matt. 25:41-46.

Preaching Pitfalls. Not too much time should be spent in refuting those who consider the Jonah miracle a myth. Here we have an instance again how Scripture interprets and confirms itself. Nor should many words be lost in explaining the Jewish manner of numbering days and nights from sundown to sundown, which was customary with the Jews and to which the Lord accommodated himself.

Problem and Goal. In the face of present-day demands for logical proof and physical demonstrations by the present evil and adulterous generation, which is wise in its own conceits, let the sermon boldly and joyfully proclaim this last great sign—Christ, the crucified and risen Redeemer, the world's only salvation. Soon He will appear to judge the world in righteousness.

Illustrations. When the Lord uses the word "adulterous," He

aptly illustrates the unfaithfulness of the Pharisees. "Unfaithful to God as a wife to a husband, apt description of men professing godliness but ungodly in heart." (Expositor's Greek Testament.) See Jer. 3:14, 20. Again, when the Lord refers to Jonah's experience, He clearly illustrates the triumphant work of the Christian Church. Jonah disappears in the belly of the great fish. His career appears to be ended. But it was not. When the Jews saw Christ laid in Joseph's tomb, the seal and the military guard placed before it, they thought that His career was ended. But it was not. He returned alive. His work goes on. "Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem," Luke 24:46-48.

Outline:

THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST — THE LAST GREAT SIGN
FOR THE GENERATIONS TO COME

I. The solemn significance of this sign.

- A. The unbelieving demand of the Pharisees for signs to see.
- B. The Lord's direction to them to behold the sign of the Prophet Jonah, which typifies the Lord's resurrection, the last great sign for them and the generations to come.

II. The gracious purpose of this sign.

- A. The purpose of signs performed by the Lord's Prophets such as Jonah, Moses, and Elijah — repentance and faith.
- B. The gracious purpose of the resurrection of Christ — repentance and faith.

HENRY C. HARTING

ROGATE

LUKE 18:1-8

The Text and the Day. — The Rogate thought, arising out of the Gospel with its promise of answer to prayers offered in the name of Jesus, is prominent in Jesus' parable on *continuing* prayer.

Notes on Meaning. — Jesus Himself supplies ample explanation, vv. 1, 6-8. "Ought" is literally "must," it is necessary, essential; the

parable is told "with a view to the being necessary" (Robertson). "Always," at all times, under all circumstances; "not to faint" explains further that *continuing*, rather than *continuous*, prayer is meant. The compelling necessity for this kind of praying arises out of the close connection with faith (8 b, with obvious reference back to chapter 17).

The widow, a symbol of helplessness, kept coming (imperfect). Satisfaction and protection she desires against one guilty of extortion and threats (cp. Matt. 23:14). The "hard-boiled" judge "kept being unwilling" (imperfect). But she "provided him trouble," threatened to "wear him down" (lit., give him black eyes). To protect his comfort, he at last capitulates.

In sharp contrast stands the Father in heaven. He, too, may delay, for He is long-suffering, forbearing both in punishing and in helping. But what a difference in His motive and actions! He, the Righteous, the loving Father, does not ignore the constant crying of His chosen ones, will at last help "suddenly" as planned.

Will the returning Jesus find "faith," literally, "that faith," faith of that sort? The question demands answer from each heart (A helpful analysis in Edersheim, *Life and Times*," 285 ff.).

Preaching Pitfalls. — It should be impossible to misinterpret the parable, what with so much explanation included with it. Note that the one basic *tertium* is one of contrast, and that the argument is not a parallel, a comparison, but a contrast from the less to the greater, from the human to the divine. The point of departure is the delay; both do. Contrast comes in the attitude on the part of those prayed to. The widow persisted and triumphed, though coming to such a judge. How much more is continuing prayer recommended to us in coming to God! But take care lest the implication is given that we are heard for our much talking or our spoiled-child insistence. "We are not to persist to make God hear us. We are to persist because we are sure that He will hear us" (Chappell).

The key for Gospel emphasis is the Savior's focusing all attention on the phrase "And shall not God . . .?" and on His linking of prayer with faith. It is all-important that faith in Christ's mercy continue; prayer exercises that faith, renews one's hold upon Christ. God's delaying tempts us to "faint," to neglect prayer, even to

doubt whether we are still "His own elect." All the more is it then necessary (*dei*) to continue, "always to pray."

Apt Quotations.—V. 39, this chapter. Romans 8:32. Luther's explanation to the introduction to the Lord's Prayer.

"Prayer is no loan of omnipotence to fulfill a certain purpose."
(T. E. Gouwens)

"No gift can possibly be so great as the Giver Himself. The richest reward of prayer . . . is a new awareness of the eternal God" (Chappell).

"Prayer is not to ask what we wish of God, but what God wishes of us." (Quoted by A. W. Fortune.)

"A man in a boat throws a rope to a rock, not to pull the rock to the boat, but to pull the boat to the rock. So with prayer" (Augustine).

"We must not conceive of prayer as an overcoming of God's reluctance, but as laying hold of his highest willingness" (Trent).

"To cease from this converse is to pronounce sentence of death on the whole upper half of our being" (Brierley).

Problem and Goal.—The neglect of prayer, whether from careless neglect or studied indifference. A serious symptom. We need God, need to keep alive our fellowship with Him. "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath."

Goal: So to focus attention upon the nature of our Father that the hearer will be drawn to determine "always to pray," permitting nothing to distract or discourage.

Outline: Jesus knew more about prayer than any other person, knew it from experience, knew it even from the heavenward side. And He says in this simple story:

CONSIDER GOD—AND KEEP ON PRAYING!

- I. Consider *His loving concern* ("And shall not God . . . ?"), His desire even for fellowship with us, namely, in Christ. Shall we not enjoy it in continuing prayer?
- II. Consider the *relationship* in which He stands toward us ("His own elect"). And shall we not exercise it in a diligent prayer life ("shall He find faith . . . ?")?

- III. Consider the *wise ways of God* ("though He bear long"). Shall we not, through continuing prayer, be drawn to conformity with His will?
- IV. Consider the *sustaining promises* ("I tell you . . . speedily"). Shall we not build on these and enjoy the fulfillment as evidences of His presence and power?

WINFRED A. SCHROEDER

ASCENSION

JOHN 14:12

The Text and the Day.—Christ's ascension completes His going to the Father. The text directs our attention not so much to our place in the heavenly mansions as rather to our task on earth, to the power which the ascended Christ confers on us, and to the great works which He performs with and through us. The text connects well with the Gospel and with Acts 1:8 of the Epistle.

Notes on the Meaning.—The disciples were distressed because they knew the hour of parting was near. In His farewell message to them (John 12—16) Jesus spoke words of comfort and power to turn their anxiety into joy.

"The works that I do"—the miracles of which He spoke in vv. 10 and 11.

"Greater works"—greater in extent and importance and in their blessed effects. The contrast is not between the believer's works and Christ's works, but between Christ's activity under the limitations of His state of humiliation and His manifestations since His ascension. Christ is the Head; the believers are the members. "What Christ works as *causa efficiens* He does also at the same time as *causa instrumentalis* through the Christians." Pieper, *Christl. Dogmatik* III:99.

The believers will do greater works "because I go unto My Father." His going to the Father included His vicarious suffering and death, His triumphant resurrection and ascension, and His session on the right hand of God. His going to the Father will enable the believers to do greater works, because the redemption of the world will be completed, and the Holy Spirit will then be given to apply the full blessings of Christ's completed work and make rivers of living water flow to the ends of the earth. The

command to preach the Gospel to every creature, to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them, will be given and carried out. Cf. John 7:39; 16:7; Acts 1:8; 10:44; Heb. 2:4.

Preaching Pitfalls.—Guard against the Reformed error according to which the Holy Spirit is present in the believer, whereas Christ is absent, being enclosed locally in heaven.

Astounding achievements of modern science, e.g., the radio, penicillin, do not require saving faith and therefore do not *per se* belong to the "greater works." Christ refers to achievements in the *spiritual* field. The conversion of one soul is a greater work than the prevention and cure of physical disease. In performing spiritual miracles the believer may be aided by modern inventions, such as the radio, the sign language, hearing aids, raised type for the blind, etc.

Preaching Emphases.—The promise of the ascended Christ. Apply it in view of the Great Commission to be witnesses for Christ to the ends of the earth. We shall not merely attempt, but *do* greater works. They are greater, though they appear insignificant in the eyes of the world. God rates them greater. No believer should consider it presumption to apply this promise to himself and act upon it.

Problem and Goal.—The problem with which we contend is lack of interest in the "greater works," lack of appreciation of our high calling through the Great Commission, lack of faith. Picture in glowing terms our glorious privilege of doing the greater works. That and the promise of success will serve as an incentive and encouragement.

Illustrations.—The 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost and Acts 2:47 b. Paul's missionary activity. Our mission in Nigeria, Japan, etc.

Outline:

THE PROMISE OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST

I. To whom it is given.

A. To him who believes in the Christ, who by His going to the Father completed the work of redemption.

B. To those who know why they are in this world and see

with the eyes of faith the glory of carrying out the Great Commission.

- C. To those who are conscious that Christ works in and through them. Christ has no hands but our hands; no lips but our lips, etc.

II. What Christ promises the believers.

- A. They will do what He did during His earthly ministry. This promise was fulfilled, Mark 16:20, and is fulfilled today wherever such confirmation of the Word is necessary.
- B. They will do greater works than He did during His earthly ministry.
- a. Greater in importance, because spiritual.
 - b. Greater in their extent, because world-wide.
 - c. Greater in their blessed effects, saving the souls of men and making them happy and blessed for time and eternity. Acts 26:18.

V. L. MEYER

EXAUDI

JOHN 16:7

The Text and the Day.—The Sunday between the Ascension and Pentecost is the link between the Redemption and the Regeneration, the Son and the Spirit, the Second Article and the Third. Gradual and Gospel are parallels of this text; the Epistle does not use its terms, but describes the process of the Spirit's guidance at work in the Christian's life.

Notes on Meaning.—The setting of the text is the Upper Room the night before the betrayal. "That I go away" is a reminiscence of ch. 14:2 and 16:5. These words remind Christians of the Ascension; soon Jesus would no longer be visibly with His disciples. Yet in their setting He is not speaking, first of all, of the Ascension; at the latter He said that He would continue to be with them always, even to the end of the world, Matt. 28:20. Perhaps in this instance the longer "absence" of the Ascension was in the Savior's mind; but surely He thought first of all of His departure into the Great Passion and death. This was a way that they could not follow, for there He tasted death for them, was forsaken by God, and then

entered Paradise as victor over death and hell. This was a way that made Him the way to the Father, a journey that meant that He prepared a place for them, 14:1-7.—The disciples might be sore at heart that He would leave them as He had said, 16:6. Yet only through His going away would it be possible for a great goal and purpose to be achieved; "that I go away" expresses an underlying purpose of the Savior. That purpose is that the Comforter should come to the disciples. The malady of the human race is that it has lost the Spirit of God; the Atonement on the Cross is necessary for the restoration of this Spirit. Cf. Gal. 4:6; Rom. 5:5-8; 1 John 4:13-15. The need of the disciples, even though they had known and learned of Jesus, was to have the Comforter, God's own Spirit, as Companion and Energizer of their way, that they might be witnesses to the world, Acts 1:8. The need of Christians in every age, also after they know the facts of the redemption in Christ Jesus, is that the Spirit of God enlarge their spiritual powers more and more, within them testifying of Jesus, 15:26; guiding them into all truth, 16:13; showing them plainly of the Father, v. 25. God does not impart Himself to the world and to the Church, namely, in His Spirit, except for the redemption by which Jesus Christ took the sins of the world upon Himself. But conversely, because Jesus did give Himself into death for all and loved the Church completely, the Father can impart the Spirit bountifully, and Jesus goes away so that He might send the Spirit back.—In the days of His flesh the Savior was a Man walking the roads and streets of Palestine; His disciples had to follow Him along those roads and streets. His great design was to give them One who would be in them and go with them always, making it possible that He could be in them a well of water springing up into everlasting life, John 4:14.

Preaching Problem and Goal.—For reasons too complex to define here, Christians have often failed to have a vivid concept of the Holy Spirit; and they have failed to bridge the gap between the redemption of Jesus Christ and the operations of the Spirit in their heart. Hence they have often fallen into a mysticism of vague spiritual sentiment on the one hand, or apathy about the practical influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives on the other. This sermon will aim to link the work of the Spirit and the redemption of Jesus

Christ. It will seek to set up one program of the way of life: God giving His Son into death that He might again establish Himself, through His Spirit, in the hearts of His people.

Preaching Pitfalls.—We have already discussed the fact that this text does not allude exclusively to the Savior's going away into the Ascension. Also the word Comforter should not be limited to connotations of one bringing comfort in sorrow, but of God's own Spirit bringing encouragement and power for every demand of life.

Illustrations.—The text is itself an illustration—Christ going away in order to make a gift greater than His physical presence possible—by which the purpose of the Atonement is demonstrated. Simple parallels can be devised: the father of the house takes leave of the family so that he can earn the daily bread which is its only subsistence; the scouts in the besieged camp take a tearful farewell of their comrades, so that at risk of their lives they penetrate the enemy lines and return with rescuers.

Outline:

REDEMPTION AND ASCENSION—THE CHRISTIAN'S LOSS
AND GAIN

I. Loss.

- A. It must have been wonderful to know Jesus personally.
What that would mean to us today!
- B. Yet He steadfastly set His face to die; He tore Himself away from His disciples after the resurrection, and is with us only invisibly today.

II. Gain.

- A. His "going away" meant that God could impart Himself in His Spirit to men and give them the new life of faith and love.
- B. This abiding presence of the Holy Spirit is better for the Christian than even the visible companionship of Christ. Cf. John 20:17, 29. For it means "comfort," courage, power, witness, right where the Christian is, and perpetually renewable through the seed of the Spirit, the Word of the Gospel, 1 Peter 1:22–2:3; 4:10–11.

RICHARD R. CAEMMERER

PENTECOST

LUKE 24:46-49

The Text and the Day.—The text, v. 49, refers to that which we commemorate this day, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Jerusalem. So also the Introit, Collect, and Gradual.

Notes on the Meaning.—The text is a very simple one. It speaks of Christ's work of redemption having been completed in accordance with Old Testament prophecy, v. 44; Isaiah 53, in order that "redemption and remission of sins" should be preached "among all nations," v. 47, by God's witnesses, v. 48 (preachers, missionaries, every Christian), endowed with the Holy Spirit with "power from on high," v. 49. A real Gospel text. In connection with the words "I send the promise of My Father upon you," see Joel 2:28-29; John 14:16-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15.

Problem and Goal.—The old Gospel which this text and the entire Scripture, 2 Tim. 3:15, proclaims is the *everlasting* Gospel, 1 Peter 1:21. It is the world's great need today: "repentance and remission of sins in His name." We should be thankful that *we* have this Gospel, but we should also preach it "among all nations," v. 47, be "witnesses," v. 48; Acts 1:8, by personal testimony in word and deed, Matt. 5:14-16; 1 Peter 2:9; Ps. 78:1-7; and by sending out missionaries at home and abroad; "among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem," v. 47.

Special Emphasis should, however, on this Day of Pentecost be given to man's need of the Holy Spirit, who alone can make the Gospel effective in the hearts and lives of men, 1 Cor. 2:14; 12:3 (see Third Article of Creed and Luther's explanation in Catechism); and who alone can endow the witnesses "with power from on high," v. 49; Luke 11:13.

The Holy Spirit works through the medium of His Word (Scripture). Therefore it is important that we read, hear, and meditate upon the Word, whereby the Holy Spirit not only brings us to faith in our Savior, but also keeps us in that faith and in holiness of life. Since the Spirit works only through the medium of the Word, we should preach and teach only that Word in the Church.

Illustrations.—As there can be no electric light nor heat without the electric current, so no faith or spiritual life without the Holy

Spirit. As the automobile without fuel and the spark to ignite it is but a dead piece of mechanism, so man without the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit remains dead in his trespasses and sins.

Outline:

In the introduction the preacher may well call attention to the fact that our Catechism speaks of the work of the Holy Ghost. He may also recite the Third Article and Luther's explanation.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY GHOST

- I. The Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel.
 - A. What this Gospel is, v. 46.
 - B. What the purpose of this Gospel is, v. 47.
- II. The Holy Ghost has called me to be a witness of this Gospel.
 - A. This Gospel should be preached among all nations, v. 47.
 - B. We, who have it, should make it known to others, v. 49.
- III. The Holy Ghost by this Gospel keeps me in faith and in a life pleasing to God even unto life eternal, vv. 46-47.

J. H. C. FRITZ