Preaching at the Crossroads: Proclaiming the Gospel at the Intersection of Christ and Culture Part 1

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Karl Barth, who is considered one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, is credited with saying, that “We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” Barth realizing that the majority of the people to whom we minister, spend the greatest percentage of their time in culture and not church, suggests that truly effective communication of the Gospel is done at the intersection of the Christ and Culture.

This is the claim made by David J. Lose in his book “Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World-And Our Preaching-Is Changing” for which this series of essays is named. Lose argues that the contemporary hearer of the gospel, who has put down the newspaper and turned to social media and the like, is so constantly and consistently bombarded with varying belief systems in culture such as: Postmodernity, Secularism, and Pluralism; that it behooves the preacher to consider the intersection between Christ and Culture as ground zero for the preparation and performance of the sermon. This means that each preacher within the construct of their own homiletical method and style needs to develop a hermeneutical lens and exegetical sensitivity that allows them to interpret not only the Bible but also the contemporary culture surrounding us.

It does not matter if your method of choice is the traditionally European cognitive/inductive methods of Buttrick, Lowery, and Craddock or the traditionally experiential and celebrative methods of Mitchell and Thomas that were produced by the Black Church, culture needs to be interpreted and included in our sermons.

I do realize that this posit in itself most urgently will illuminate the different strands or camps of thought if you will, as it pertains to preaching at the intersection of Christ and Culture. The first strand that would have an opinion about this intersection would be the camp of Expository Preaching. Preachers that primarily use this style as a default may see the intersection of Christ and Culture as an insult to the interpretation of the text and the performance of the preaching moment, as stylistically there is a high regard for a sermon that literally interprets and proclaims the gospel verse by verse. For the proclaimers in this camp, put simply, there is very little room for contemporary cultural exegesis.

The second camp of thought would be the Narrative Preaching tradition. Preachers that preach in this style would most likely readily embrace the inclusion of the intersection of Christ and Culture in their preaching. Since this style of preaching is based on the carving of Biblical and Theological material into the rhetorical shapes of storytelling, cultural images are a must. These images can only
be used with integrity if they are searched for, found and collected at the place where Christ intersects Culture.

The final camp of thought would be the Social Justice strand of preaching which is committed to speaking truth to power concerning the personal and systemic injustices and ills in society. Preachers in this group will also in part embrace this effort and be encouraged in their stride toward justice because it is at the crossroad of Christ and Culture that the sufferings and groaning of this world can receive the response and the resources of Heaven.

The question is, how is this done? This is what this series of essays will attempt to investigate. Once a month we will have an installment that will include insight on current trends in homiletical thought and method as well as a sample sermon that attempts to model preaching at this crossroad. It will include a backstory that will help the reader/listener identify the specifics of the intersection. Please note that some of the linguistic liberties that are taken in the sermon manuscript are done to insure the orality of the sermon. Because Black preaching is historically an oral art form there are some adjustments that need to be taken in order to change a sermon from verbal to visible. This is done to transport the reader from the exercise of examining the page to experiencing the preaching. Next month we will discuss how Post Modernity, Secularism and Pluralism is affecting and infecting our preaching.

This month’s sermon was written and preached by the writer at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago for their Drug and Alcohol Awareness Revival.

“UNSUNG: The Story of Jacob”

Genesis 32:21–24 (NLT)
21 So the gifts were sent on ahead, while Jacob himself spent that night in the camp. 22 During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two servant wives, and his eleven sons and crossed the Jabbok River with them. 23 After taking them to the other side, he sent over all his possessions. 24 This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break.

It has hit rock bottom hasn’t it...Television in America. Though, I wont go into all of my normal treatment of the declination of TV suffice it to say that I trace the most detrimental moments to the creation and subsequent explosion of reality shows in America. This is the only country where reality shows work like they do and the following fictional reality show narrative would even be possible. America is the only place that:

In this Amazing Race called life while many of us seek to be an American Idol and move from being an Apprentice to earning and owning, it behooves us we feel, to be more than a Bachelor or Bachelorette; no matter what Big Brother says. So we might go on a Blind Date. Only to find out that they are the Biggest Loser, which leads to one of us ending up on Cheaters, thinking I could have been a
Contender on Danger Island. However, instead we opt for an Extreme Makeover to overcome our Fear Factor of those who have been Growing up Gotti or at least lived there as a Houseguest.

Until you realize I Hate My Job and long to meet Joe Millionaire or at least the Average Joe. But now you know that is a joke and you sound like The Last Comic Standing while your friends are busy with the Making of their Band. Unfortunately your daydream is interrupted by your Big Fat Obnoxious Boss who makes you work late so you have to call your Nanny 911 who is over the Osborne’s house waiting for Xhibit Pimp their Ride. When it doesn't happen they realize that they've just been Punk’d by the boys from Queer Eye for the Straight guy. Now back to the Real World where the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Model Search has a few men thinking about Trading Spouses or at least is providing them temptations that proves to be the Ultimate Love Test. Since your money is not where you want it to be you are the one Who Wants to be a Millionaire or definitely the one Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire.

And right now your pocket is looking like The Weakest Link and it makes you want to treat your bill collectors like WWF Monday Night Smackdown but you can’t do that because that is not reality. Especially when you realize that now you can when America’s God Talent with no talent and be one of The Real Housewives of Atlanta without having a house or a husband.

Again It has indeed hit rock bottom hasn’t it, Television in America. However there is one saving grace on television, at least in the genre of non-Reality Reality Television and that is the offering by TV One TV called Unsung. It presents past and current stars and celebrities from Music TV and Cinema that for whatever reason just before or just after their success ran into difficulty fell from grace and consequently caused their career to be looked at as Unsung.

One night while watching this, what I consider brilliant show I began to wonder what the show unsung would look like if it featured the life of Biblical celebrities. As I did this, my mind began to peruse the pictorial of biblical characters both big and small that matched the rudimentary and routine-like mold of Unsung. I caught a sensory snag on the life of Jacob and I began to imagine what an Unsung of Jacob’s life would be like. That is when in my version of the show came on: UNCOMPROMISED, UNRECOGNIZED AND UNPARALLELED...Unsung: The Story of Jacob.

As the show opens I see Jacob standing at a mic in front of a crowd of people and as he approached I noticed that he his walk was very deliberate and intentional but definitely disturbed. He tapped the mic and said “Testing! Testing!” Then he said words that might be familiar to some but I admit they threw me off. He said, “My name is Jacob and I am an addict.” The people said, “Hi Jacob!” He smiled took a deep breath and said “I’m sure some of you are thrown off by my confession but there are two reasons that you had never heard of this part of me. In fact it is not even in the
record of my story in the Bible. I’ll tell you one reason now and save one till the end. The initial reason is that this is the first time I have ever felt comfortable sharing my story.

Before he could finish whole story my mind began to rehearse the Sunday school lessons of Jacob’s life. As began to do so I wondered if I could have ever seen this coming and revelation came as I familiarized myself with the study of addictive behaviors, causes, symptom and triggers. It was then that I saw see that this confession in my version of Unsung was way more than possible, more than plausible and more likely probable. That if Jacob’s Unsung episode did not include his addiction it definitely would have included his addictive behavior.

You see addiction or addictive behavior is generically defined as the cause of one who becomes physiologically or psychologically dependent on a substance such as as alcohol or a narcotic. However I hated that particular definition because it seemingly pigeonholed a small group while letting others off the hook. But there was another wonderful definition that I believe we will use as our working definition for this offering. Addiction is when one habituates themselves to something so compulsively or obsessively that they are willing to abandon their true and normal sense of self to the point that it becomes the new normal.

It is said to be caused on several different levels from Biological to Psychological even to Sociological and these are ironically seen in Jacob Unsung as well as in the life of those of us with the strong testimony that we have been delivered. In fact it is even in the lives of those of us that do not want to admit it. Because the qualifying reasoning for addictive behavior is, the excessive, repetitive use of pleasurable activities to cope with unmanageable internal conflict, pressure, and stress, all of us whether we like or not if we are truthful are guilty of some type of addictive behavior.

Behavior that in a real sense that reveals to us that we can be addicted to more than just crack, heroin, cocaine, Meth, prescriptions, and alcohol. It is so easy for some of us to point the fingers of self-engrandisment but what about the repetitive use of other things that if we don’t have them it will mess with our psychological and physiological realities. I mean what about the addictive behaviors we have concerning: Food; work; exercise; gambling; sex; porn; shopping; Facebook and social media; Starbucks; Reality shows, cell phones, gossip, Co dependency and yes even Church. The truth is that when we don’t get a hit of these things we will act in ways that are not normal to us and change ourselves into something that becomes the new normal.

Finally as I tune back into the show, I hear Jacob say and what is the most crazy. He suggests that there is pressure put on those of us that could potentially addicts because most times we are the most gifted. We are the ones that have charisma, the ones who have intelligence and creativity. We are the ones that long to be honest and that people expect to lead them but what they don’t know is that gifts
come with burdens, like low self-esteem and the feeling of being inadequate. I mean what does it mean to and for me that when you say I'm great, I don't believe it. It comes with stress and the impulsivity of trying to prove myself and finally the innate desire to get ahead and prove to myself and others that I am of worth even if I have to get over you.

That is when in my version of Unsung, Jacob began to tear up and testified that all of my life I had been fighting to be good enough. Even in my mother Rebekah’s womb, he said I was in a fight my twin brother Esau for nourishment, for food, and to be first. We fought so hard that my mom had complications. I was just trying to be good enough but Esau was born first. As a result even though God told my mother that he would one day serve me, I was born a loser.

If that was not enough while growing up my father, Isaac liked Esau better than he liked me. I couldn't help that Esau was stronger, had more hair and was tougher. I had allergies I did not like hunting but you remember my dad was an outdoorsman like his dad, Granddaddy Abraham. Not me, I was softer and more timid. In fact rather than going outside I like being in the kitchen with mama. So you know they bullied me at school, called me bad names and questioned my sexuality and my machismo. However that didn’t hurt as bad as the disappointment in my dad Isaac’s eyes when he looked at me. It was different than how he looked at Esau and though I already felt like a loser, now I feel like a let down.

So I decided to cope and feel good the best way that I could. I decided that I was going to live up to my name. You remember that my name means supplanter or trickster and that is one thing I was good at. In fact I didn't even have to wait long before prime opportunity would arise. One day I was cooking some stew and my big brother Esau return home from a long hunt. He was hungry and wanted some stew; I told him he would have to sell me his birthright if he wanted some of this stew. Reluctantly he did it and I got his birthright for stew. That was my thing I could get over on people; I didn't know why I was so good I just was. You do know at the height of every addiction develops the ability to get over no matter the cost to the relationship with the person whom you got over on. It was just natural to me and I didn’t know why, until...

Until that morning my mother called me to her and said that she had just overheard my father preparing and planning to give Esau the blessing. She looked at me and devised a plan that we were going to trick my father and steal Esau’s blessing. I didn’t realize it then but now I do that it was at that moment that I should have seen that the addictive behavior that others and me struggle with is more times than not is generational. My mother was a trickster! She is the one that told and taught me how to trick my father and steal the blessing, the mantle, and the substance of my father before he died. She had it planned down to the very last details; the recipe of the lamb, the wool on my arms, the robe for the blessing and even how to disguise my voice.
And I did it I stole the blessing and when Esau heard he vowed to kill me. So my mother had a contingency plan for me to run. That too, of course, is the sign of addictive behavior the lack of ability to take responsibility for the mess that one has made. I admit I was scared and I ran just like my momma said to my Uncle Laban’s house and when I got there I found out he was a trickster too. I’m not going to lie, Uncle Laban got me a couple of times but ultimately I tricked him and used his own resources to be come richer than he.

Now some time has passed but I am ok; I am stronger, wiser and better. I am twice married not because I divorced but because I have two wives. Things are going well, I am successful and I am just about to the land of Canaan, which was the land of my grandfather, the land of the promise. But before I can get to the promise I hear that my brother Esau, who I have not seen in about 20 years is not only looking for me but on his way to me. BOOM! That is when a daunting reality hit me that God loves us so much that most times before he allows us to walk into the promises of the future God makes us face the unresolved issues of our past in our present.

There I am on the precipice of my promise and God makes me face my past. So once again like the hustler I am I tried to get around it and that’s when we pull into the parking lot of our periscope. After I sent the gifts across the Jabbock River and I tried to lie down to slumber, I could not sleep. After pacing for a while I sent both my wives Leah and Rachel across into the Promised Land with my children and my servants while I remained on the other side. I sent the people that were with me and knew me over into the Promised Land because and I stayed because I still had issues from the past to deal with. They were there because of me but went in before me because my past caught up with me.

That’s when the deepest darkest moment of my life hit me and I dare to believe that this moment has the life of anyone who has ever struggled with any type of an addiction. This is the darkest point of addiction and that is that when you get close to your promise but have to stand by yourself, with yourself and confront yourself. All of your excuses are gone and you cannot blame anyone. You cannot cute your way out, drink or smoke your way out; you can't even sex or porn your way out. You cannot spend or network your way out; you have to confront yourself, by yourself with yourself. For me this was too much as I was already too stressed out. My family is in the Promised Land and I’m hoping that they are safe. I have to deal with my brother tomorrow, a brother who I have not seen in 20 years and the last time I saw him I stole his patriarchal blessing. Now I am by myself, facing myself with myself. All of this should have been enough but then it happened... Somebody hit me! Somebody picked a fight with me!

I knew it had to be Esau Sneaking me like he used to when we were young. He used to beat me up all of the time but not today. In the words of the YouTube sensation Sweet Brown, “Ain’t nobody got time for that!” So we are fighting and we are going at it; I was determined not to lose to Esau this time. I wrong for stealing his stuff and getting over on everyone but I just did not want to be the loser again.
We fought so intensely that it was almost morning and the Sun was about to rise. It was when this dude saw that he could not beat me that he pulled a move from UFC fighting he hit me in my hipbone and dislocated my hip. Of course now I was injured but I kept fighting; I was broken but I still had some fight in me.

Then the man said, “Let me go!” When I heard his voice I knew it wasn’t Esau. I thought to myself, Really? You picked the fight with me. I was minding my own business, dealing with the potential consequences of my own addictive behaviors; then I end up fighting you just defending myself and you injure me. Now you demand that I let you go. I thought all of that but there was only one statement came out. I said, “I won’t let You go till You bless me.”

I thought about the fact that I have been through too much to come out of this thing empty handed. I have suffered too much, prayed too much and cried too much. I have lied sometime, had to apologize some times. I’ve been running and fighting too long and too hard not to get a blessing out of this. I’m injured, I’m broken I wanna quit but I can’t let go. I need you now; not another second or minute but right now! Father I stretch my hands my to Thee and if I let go, I might miss something. “I won’t let You go till You bless me!”

He asked me my name and I asked him his and we had a face off. One more thing happened but before I tell you that I want to say one thing. Yes I was injured that fight and yes I have this ugly limp. But don’t feel sorry for me. Don’t look down when you see me walking with a cane because of my limp. Don’t feel bad because I use those designated spaces you call handicaps at the grocery store. The reason I don’t want you to feel sorry for me is because my limp is not impairment but it is proof that I have seen God’s face. You see named the place Penuel because I have seen the face of God. Every time I limp I’m reminded of His face.

Oh I know why you are not shouting. You are waiting for the second reason that you had never heard about my addictions or my addictive behaviors You are wondering how is it possible that have you been in Sunday school all of your life and heard me preached 1,000 times but never knew about my addiction or addictive behaviors. The reason is because He changed my name and my record was expunged! And I wonder is there anybody here than can touch your neighbor and say you can’t call me what you used to! HE CHANGED MY NAME! Say Yeah! Yeah!