What is A Systems Sermon?

by Israel Galindo

ABSTRACT: *Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) continues to influence thinking about the practice of ministry, especially related to clergy leadership functions in a congregation. One of those key functions is preaching. In this article professor Israel Galindo speculates on one intersection of BFST and ministry: preaching in the congregational context. He proposes some ideas about what constitutes a "systems sermon" and identifies four components of what constitutes such an approach to preaching. At heart, he argues that a "systems sermon" has more to do with the position that clergy hold in the congregational system and the pastoral relationship they have with their congregations.*

The position of leadership that a pastor occupies in the context of a congregational system is unique. Few other organizational systems require the variety of functions called for in the position of clergy, including that of preaching weekly. Regardless of whatever else is going on in the life of the congregation or in the minister's own family, Sunday comes around every week, and with it, the need to step into the pulpit and preach. The act of preaching is a pastoral function that holds interesting "systems" implications. Few leaders have the opportunity to address the system they lead on such a regular basis in such a public, corporate, and intergenerational forum. Few leaders are afforded the audience to speak to the minds and hearts of their constituents from the position of pastor, priest, and prophet.

When we issued a call for "systems sermons" to publish in the Leadership in Ministry newsletter (www.LeadershipinMinistry.com) one reader responded with a legitimate question: "What makes for a good systems sermon?" I cannot find anything overt on what constitutes a good "systems sermon" in the hermeneutical literature. But I suspect that a good systems sermon is more about incorporating certain qualities than about rigid attention to a definitive set of rhetorical components crafted into the textual structure of the sermon. Specifically, a good systems sermon is not *about* systems theory—it is about fulfilling the pastoral function that addresses emotional process in the congregation. That said, in my thinking, a good systems sermon gives attention to certain aspects of both content and delivery. While there may be more to what makes for a good systems sermon I think it has at least some or all of the following:

✦ Clarity about the pastor's relationship with the congregation
✦ Redemptive self-definition
✦ Awareness and respect of emotional triangles
Attention to and respect of multigenerational transmission.

Additionally, a good systems sermon demonstrates clarity of the *function* of preaching in the congregational context. A sermon delivered by the pastor (leader) of a congregation is not merely a well-honed homily or polished hermeneutical or theological exposition of a text. It has a function by virtue of who is preaching (the pastor-leader), who is being addressed (the congregation who make up the community—the system), and the context that mediates their relationship (the Church, a community of faith). Therefore, a pastoral sermon has purpose in its function: Challenge (the prophetic element, including vision), Perspective (the particular principles and values that inform one's stance), Theological content (a confessional stance about corporate beliefs and values), and attention to Identity (the unique corporate culture of the congregation). But most importantly a good systems sermon is, first of all, a good *sermon*.

Clarity of Relationship With the Congregation

As a seminary professor I get to hear and read my share of "seminarian sermons." It's part of the literary purgatory that comes with the job. What most of those novice sermons tend to have in common are: (1) an over-focus on content and a lack of attention to the mysteries and vagaries of life and relationships, and, (2) a lack of attention to (or awareness of) the relational aspect between the pastor and the flock that should inform the *function* of the sermon. These liabilities are understandable since, respectively, seminarians tend to be young and have not yet experienced much of life and most have not been in the position of pastor long enough (if at all) to have experienced the unique role of pastor to a congregation. For the majority of seminarians preaching remains, mostly, performance grounded in textual exposition—rather than a pastoral function grounded in a congregational context mediated by the relationship between pastor and flock.

Redemptive Self-Definition

A good systems sermon reflects both self-differentiation and self-definition on the part of the proclaimer. When a pastor of a congregation stands before the flock with messages that communicate, "I will take care of you;" "I need you to validate my worth and ministry;" "You need me, and would be lost without me;" "I bear your burden;" or, "I know it all, I'm the expert," he or she reflects not only a lack of self-differentiation, but may reveal a neurotic relationship between pastor and congregation. Self-differentiation allows for the ability to self-define one's own beliefs and values while allowing the same for the other. Additionally, self-differentiation does not have a need to borrow self unduly from others—individuals, groups, or organizations.

Preacher and professor Barbara Brown Taylor offers good advice on self-definition. "My rule for public truth telling is simple: only say 'I' when you are reasonably sure that those listening to you can say 'me too'. . . . There are several good reasons for following this rule. In the first place, it provides a helpful check on a preacher's natural exhibitionism. In the second place, it recognizes the difference between an audience and a congregation. An audience gathers to be entertained by someone else's peculiar take on truth, and to talk about it afterward. A congregation gathers to be engaged by the common truth that makes them who they are, and to do something about it afterward."[1]

Attention To and Respect of Emotional Triangles

Leaders occupy the anxiety point of multiple systemic triangles in any system. And clergy who serve in congregations, systems of chronic anxiety, find themselves perpetually a part of the emotional triangles in the congregational system. Some of these triangles are inherited by virtue of office (and therefore, systemic), and some come about due to acute anxiety or personal issues. When caught in a triangle, the pastor may be on the receiving end of anxiety or may be the one dishing it out.

The mature and self-differentiated pastor has the capacity to monitor his or her own anxiety and resists bringing anxiety triangles into the pulpit in a willful way. Scholar Walter Breuggemann has warned about the dangers of triangling scripture, God, and the congregation when preaching. Anxious triangles inevitably lead to willfulness. Brueggemann cautions that when that happens in preaching: "In the place of the text, stands the voice of the pastor. That leaves the pastor vulnerable and exposed, for it is only one person's voice. People are not fooled by the substitution when they receive the word of the pastor instead of the voice of the text."[2] But a pastor may also self-define his or her position in the triangle though the sermon without being willful (by not making demands, assigning blame, giving ultimatums, or insisting on conformity), thereby shifting emotional process.

Defining self serves to give responsibility back to whom it belongs—and sometimes, anxiety and responsibility belong to the congregation rather than the pastor. Typically the (anxious) congregation will ask the pastor to assume its anxiety and responsibility—but the wise and mature pastor knows when to give it back. The capacity to do this in a responsible and redemptive manner makes for some of the most powerful and transformative moments in a congregation, or at the very least, in the relationship between a congregation and the pastor.

Attention To and Respect of Multigenerational Transmission

The best "systems sermons" I've heard give attention to, or highlight for the congregation, the power of multigenerational transmission and the family projection process. Those are examples of the "hidden life forces" that are so determinative of relationship systems, yet most people remain unaware of how they affect their functioning in the systems of which they are a part.[3] For example, often a pastor's family birth order influences the "systems" relationship component of his or her preaching more than does the delivery style or the textual hermeneutics. It is quite dramatic to hear the voice of a "first born," or that of a "middle child" or a "baby in the family" come through in moments of transparency in a sermon delivery. Because birth order and family projection process are so much a part of what constitutes self-identity, pastors often define and position themselves from that orientation in their relationship with their congregations, including in their preaching.

Multigenerational transmission and family projection process have two facets every pastor must give attention to. The first is the pastor's own genogram related to each. The second is the congregaton's multigenerational transmission and "family" projection issues. On the positive side, the pastor can remind the congregation that, as Church, it does not stand alone nor does it exist disconnected from its past—its saints and sages, its Abrahams and Saras. But a congregation is also a living community that suffers the ghosts of its Jacobs and Cains—rogues, black sheep, and tricksters. A congregation always exists in the middle of the story, and their pastors enter, minister, and leave from that point, and thereby become a part of the story, as saint or sage, as rogue pastor who never really belonged, or whatever part of the community narrative he or she is assigned. Legacies are celebrated or endured in the present, but they also shape the future.

On the negative side, the pastor may have to navigate the family projection process that is inherent in the congregational system. For example, a tendency to make a martyr or saint of its pastors, or a tendency to make convenient identified patients of its staff. Or an overfocus on the appearance and behavior of the pastor's family, or stuckness over "power" issues. The fundamental dynamic in the projection process is a lack of respect for the boundaries of self between the persons who make up a system. Any pastor who buys into the projection needs of his or her congregation, and therefore denies authentic self, loses the capacity to be prophetic in the preaching function. Instead, the (homeostatic) reciprocal stance may become, "I will be what you need and want me to be."

Preaching is not performance, although it includes that. Preaching, at heart, is a pastoral function that is contextual. And it is a pastoral function that is both informed and shaped by the pastor-congregation relationship of the context—the congregational relational-emotional system. Simply put, the sermon is as much about the preacher, the congregation, and their relationship in the context of being church, as it is about the text. Until that concept becomes clear, and until systems thinking becomes a part of the way a pastor functions, the sermon event may never provide opportunity to address the emotional process of a congregation. ◆

NOTES:

[1]Barbara Brown Taylor, "Telling Truths," *The Christian Century. July 25, 2006, page 31.*

[2]Walter Breuggemann, "The Preacher, The Text, and The People," *Review & Expositor.* Vol. 102, No. 3. p 495.

[3]For the concept of "hidden life forces" see Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations* (Reston: Alban Institute, 2004).

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BFST Concepts and Preaching Themes

BFST shares with pastoral theology two concerns of fundamental interest: the universal issues concerning the nature of human relationships and the question of what it means to be human. It is no surprise then that the eight basic concepts of BFST (and Bowen's undeveloped ninth concept) seem to lend themselves to themes and pastoral responses through the sermon. Below are examples of possibilities for the intersection between BFST and the functions of the pastoral sermon.

Systems Concepts	Possible sermon themes and responses
Multigenerational transmission	• Address and interpret biological family multigenerational issues (faith, habits, practices, pathologies, etc.) • Multigenerational systemic issues of the congregation • Interpret multigenerational faith issues • Interpret how family of origin influences faith formation through generations • Interpret multigenerational transmission issues in biblical and theological themes
Self-differentiation	• Defining the function of the pastor • Defining the identity, culture, or values of the congregation • Defining theological or doctrinal distinctive of congregation • Offering a prophetic stance on social or ecclesiastical issues • Modeling self-differentiated thinking and speech through message and illustrations
Homeostasis	• Dealing with change • Challenging resistance to change • Celebrating and interpreting congregational cultural rites and traditions • Interpreting ecclesiastical and liturgical practices that perpetuate positive homeostasis
Triangles	• Defining one's position in triangles with congregation and issues • Illustrating and interpreting triangles in Biblical narratives • Speaking to ethical behavior and choices in relationship triangles in family, church, and work • Modeling positive functioning in triangles
Emotional Cutoff	• Healing, confessing, or addressing denominational cut-offs • Addressing cut-off issues with: founding church, a church split, a former pastor or staff members • Interpreting a Christian redemptive response to family or relationship cutoffs
Nuclear Family Emotional System	• Dealing with personal pastoral family issues related to calling, ministry, functioning • Sharing insight into how congregations work on an emotional-systems level • Interpreting biblical texts related to Bible families
Birth Order	• Awareness of how one's birth order may give "voice" in a sermon or message • Awareness of how to use illustrations related to birth order and functioning in marriage, family, and church • Interpreting biblical texts involving sibling family dynamics
Societal Emotional Process	• Interpret how societal context, issues, and emotional processes affect the congregation • Speak to how faith responds to societal emotional process • Speak to how the Church responds to societal emotional process
Supernatural phenomenon	• Interpreting faith and reason related to the experience of faith • Lending validity to the experience of the unknown and unexplainable • Celebrating the mystery of the experience of life and faith