

The Homiletical Plot
Expanded Edition

The Sermon as Narrative Art Form

Eugene L. Lowry

Foreword by Fred B. Craddock

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Preface

A lot has happened since 1980 when *The Homiletical Plot* was first published. As a result, the purpose and form of this re-issue of the book is prompted by two quite different considerations. First, it seems appropriate for authors to note what has influenced their thought since a book first appeared. Second, given the mixed-result history of authorial attempts to revise or update volumes still in print, the editors and I think it best to keep the original text in place—for whatever merit is present—and then find a supplemental way to speak of further reflections, adjustments, corrections, and additions to the work.

Fred Craddock, who graciously recommended this book the first time around, has consented to write a foreword to this re-issue—commenting on the significant events that have occurred in this twenty-plus-year interval in North American homiletics.

In these past twenty or so years, I have had more than a few thoughts on the same subject. Therefore, I have written an afterword, sharing my further reflections on *The Homiletical Plot*.

My deep gratitude goes to Fred Craddock, the editors of Westminster John Knox Press—and *especially*

to the readers who have kept *The Homiletical Plot* in print over these two decades.

Eugene L. Lowry

Foreword

When asked by the editor of this volume to write a foreword, I assumed it would be a foreword to a revised edition of *The Homiletical Plot*. It was a natural assumption. Most authors who risk words on paper would welcome an opportunity, after critical reviews, conversations with colleagues, and classroom use, to revise, eliminate, expand, and defend one's published work. However, publishers and editors do not often provide such opportunities, and so most of us are left to stand on street corners hailing passersby, "In case you read my book, what I really meant to say was . . ."

Why, then, re-issue a book after twenty years, without making changes? An afterword by the author has been added, to be sure, but the text of 1980 remains without modification. This is a most interesting phenomenon. Is it a matter of saying, "Out of respect for those who praised the book, I will not alter it"? Or perhaps Prof. Lowry is responding to his critics, "This is my story, and I am sticking to it." Of course, re-issuing the text without change could be from the conviction that the book was ahead of its time, but now that the homiletical world has caught up, it can be read with greater benefit. However, the

reason may be simpler and more simply put: Whether 1980 or 2000, the book has continued to be of sufficient value to deserve remaining in print as it is.

Whatever the thinking of Prof. Lowry and his editor, they obviously share the conviction that *The Homiletical Plot* can sit comfortably on the shelf with the scores of books on preaching since 1980. This book, then, is not offered as a period piece, a resource for those researching the recent history of homiletics. Rather, it comes to the preacher and to the teacher of preaching as a word to be heard, both again and for the first time.

My task, therefore, in preparing to write a foreword, was not to read but to re-read. A shortcut tempted me. Since I had made many marginal notes in my 1980 copy, why not read those comments and determine if they were worth repeating? Like all temptations, this one had merit. After all, if the text was unmodified, why could not my comments on it be unmodified as well? But I rejected the idea; the new issue of the book warranted a new reading. I laid aside my copy, checked out a copy from the library, read it, made new notes (not on the library copy!) and then compared them with my original notes.

The re-reading was very much a new reading—enough time had passed and I had read in the interim many books on preaching. Notes separated by twenty years revealed quite a few close correspondences. For example, I again applauded Prof. Lowry's use of resources outside the field of preaching. Philosophy, psychology, drama, literature, and theology: These and other disciplines inform the book. Preaching, like other areas of thought and practice, cannot survive by breathing in its own face. Likewise, I noted a

second time appreciation for the author's making room for intuition in the sermon process. Most of us give lip service to the fact that preaching is an art as well as a science, but then we become afraid that someone will think we speak of preaching as an art as an excuse for ambiguity, sloppy thinking, and poor reasoning. In defense, we omit all art and artistry and proceed to offer the reader an adequate technology for framing and delivering the message. My second notes also repeated an earlier positive regard for Lowry's attention to transitions in the sermon. More than once it has been brought to my attention that this is an area in my own work sorely in need of more effort. Had I paid more attention to Lowry, perhaps I would have been delivered from my tendency to be episodic in my preaching with insufficient mortar between the episodes. Again, I remain ambivalent as to whether a brief section on "Variations" near the close of the book adequately counters the tendency to standardize the narrative art form presented as the primary burden of the book. My ambivalence in 2000 is not as strong as in 1980. In 1980 I was still very much involved in the study of Jesus' parables, finding a surprise of grace at the end of each. None of the parables are the same, literally or theologically. Neither are they narrative art forms, an observation with which Lowry agrees, but perhaps with more reluctance than necessary.

In my notes of 1980 and of 2000, I gave the author a hearty "Amen" for scoring a common misuse of illustrations in sermons. Lowry correctly observes the frequent substitution of illustration for diagnosis. Either through failure to appreciate the vital importance of diagnosis in a sermon or through the inability

to perform it, many preachers arrive at the point of diagnosis and offer an illustration instead. Usually illustrations are interesting, but nothing in the message is more interesting than an analysis of what is really going on, in a biblical text, in a story, in a life. Contrary to popular opinion, illustrations do not cover a multitude of sins. Equally enthusiastic is my continued agreement with Lowry's recognition that the introduction of characters in a sermon adds interest, reality, ambiguity, and complexity. Listeners are persons engaged with other persons, and therefore sermons consisting solely of ideas, however true and important, are unreal and unengaging. A landscape without any population eventually bores even the most artistic. So important is this feature of preaching that it could well have been more fully developed, even in a brief text.

In sum, the close correspondences between notes in 1980 and 2000 (and there were others not mentioned here) yield the clear conclusion that there is much of value to inform and to enliven the pulpit. This is true whether or not the preacher embraces the narrative art form as the method of choice.

As one would expect, many of my notes taken during a 2000 reading of *The Homiletical Plot* differ from those of 1980. The differences owe less to any change of mind and more to the vantage point of reflection. Prof. Lowry has presented preaching as narrative art form, and he has done so in forward fashion from beginning to end. This is as it should be; after all, he is trying to help the preacher who must move from vague, inchoate notions to delivery of a clear and effective message. But my reading of the book after twenty years was not a walk through the process of

sermon preparation but a reflection on narrative art form as a viable method. This difference in perspective is a very important factor in my evaluation of Lowry's book and, in turn, his evaluation of my comments. For example, after the event of Jesus Christ, his followers re-read the Old Testament and this perspective yielded results far different from a forward reading of the same texts. An account of the childhood of Abraham Lincoln written as a daily journal would be quite different from reflections on that childhood after he became an assassinated president. Prof. Lowry's writing and my reading almost a generation later are quite different experiences of the same material, with each perspective yielding its own truth. It seemed important to bring this fact to consciousness before proceeding with these comments.

Needless to say, my present estimations of this book are influenced by trends in homiletical theory since 1980 and especially as those trends include responses to Lowry's work. Predictably, one response has been couched in Hamlet's advice to the oratorical Polonius: "More matter and less art." I call this reaction "predictable" because there still lives among us the ancient notion that there is an essential enmity between form and content. Let someone give valuable and needed attention to form and style, and soon comes the charge that substance and content are to the writer inconsequential. Let a book on any subject reveal literary artistry on the part of the author, and immediately its scholarship is questioned. Such thinking persists in spite of the fact that Luke put the lie to this dichotomous reaction long ago by producing a Gospel in which the Christian message is happily joined to conscious literary art. Of course a

writer may, for whatever reasons, deliberately minimize or de-value content, but such is not to be assumed of a writer who wishes to devote attention to method in preaching. One cannot say everything in one volume; to attempt it is to dull the edge of all that is being said. To say everything is to say nothing. One writes of one thing with such conviction that the impression is given that this one subject rises above all others. Every good sermon is heresy when judged for all the important truths left untreated. So with the writer in the field of homiletics, let others develop other matters with equal vigor, but let all affirm the contributions of each. Having said that, it should be noted with reference to Lowry's book that anyone who finds the content of the Christian faith absent from its pages needs to read it again more carefully.

A second criticism of *The Homiletical Plot* would be aimed at any book that proposes a new sermon form. All who preach know that a change of form is widely heard as a change of content. Suppose a preacher to a particular congregation uses essentially the same pattern for all the sermons of an eighteen-year ministry. The successor to that pulpit preaches with a different form, or perhaps with different forms. The eighteen years of one pattern had come to define for that congregation what a sermon was. The conclusion: The new minister is either not preaching or is preaching a different message. After a few Sundays someone is bold enough to say, "We like your talks, but we are accustomed to more Bible." An examination may reveal more biblical content in the new sermons than in the old, but a change of form is often heard as a change of content. Any book proposing a new form should expect to be greeted with the same suspicion.

On the other hand, a quick and uncritical embrace of a book may pose even greater problems for a writer. Such was the fate of dialogue sermons. Easy friends of the method assumed that if two persons speak the sermon then all the problems burdening the monologue would be lifted. Likewise with conversational preaching. Great! No preparation required. Step casually out of the pulpit, drape the body over the corner of a table and ask, "What shall we talk about today?" Serious proponents of preaching as conversation in the true sense of the word, proponents who know how much difficult work is involved, run for cover, screaming "no, no, no!" Such has been the swift and smiling embrace of narrative preaching by some who read only the title of Lowry's work and rushed into the pulpit telling stories, all kinds of stories. I am sure that every time someone praises Lowry for setting him or her free from exegetical chores and theological probing, giving permission to talk about childhood foibles and Uncle Clyde's wig and calling it preaching, Lowry crawls under the bed. With friends like that, who needs critics?

Some, of course, have read this volume carefully and thoughtfully and have been refreshed by it. They bring its contents *in toto*, in part, or in modification to their own preaching ministries with profit. If they add narrative art form to their stable of forms and methods (No one should ride the same horse in every race.), then a healthy pulpit exists for both preacher and listeners. However, if anyone grasps Lowry's method as the only method, standardizing it, employing it every week without variation, then the last state of the pulpit will not be worse than the first, but the improvement may be short lived. The late Joseph

Sittler, having heard too many neat sermons similarly packaged, often complained that the minister was the only person in town with “all that symmetry.” It is a disservice to any form to elevate it as *the* form. To do so is to forget the advice of Kierkegaard: “Something true when whispered may become false when shouted.”

Very likely the major influence of Prof. Lowry’s work is to be found in pulpits and classrooms among preachers and teachers who may not even be aware of the sources of their views. This is not to say that stealing or unacknowledged borrowing of material is going on. There is some plagiarism to be sure, but some ideas enter our minds as being so natural, so true, and so right that no ownership need be claimed or attributed. They seem to belong to everyone by virtue of being the way things are and, therefore, they are always available in the marketplace of thought. Graham Greene once spoke of writers as persons who forget more easily than others. Forgetfulness, he said, is the compost of the imagination. The same is true of preachers and teachers of preaching, even those most careful to honor sources and who have the strongest conscience on the issue of plagiarism.

In the seventies and early eighties, there was near panic in the ranks of homileticians. In many places, pulpits were being emptied, not only because listeners were noticeably absent but also because preachers were losing their appetite for what they were saying and how they were saying it. Seminarians were seeking ministries “without pulpit.” The popular image of the preacher was that of a lifeless, nagging drone. Fosdick, Bonnell, Scherer, Franklin, Buttrick, Hamilton, Bartlett, Kennedy and others had been out there for some time and making a difference,

but there were not enough to go around and these extraordinary few seemed unwilling to live forever. Something needed to be done; the churches insisted and so did the preachers. The burden seemed naturally to fall on those who taught homiletics. Some repeated the old saws but raised the volume. Others busied themselves in a frantic search for new and lively forms and styles. Experimentation abounded. Anything short of Russian roulette was taken into the pulpit to create a pulse, to make some nerve twitch, to break out of the general state of ennui. Needless to say, mistakes were made. Substance was at times denied access to the pulpit while some new style was being tried. Unhappy marriages between form and content could not last. Many books were written: heavy volumes calling Israel back to her tents; thin paperbacks saying by their size and cut, "Maybe this might work, but if not, the price is only \$5.00."

Happily, most of those early sincere but flawed attempts have faded from the memory of classroom and pulpit. They surface only in the bibliographies of dissertations on the recent history of preaching. But in the main, balanced good sense has returned to the discipline of homiletics. Full meals are being served to the listeners—tasty, too, and well arranged on the plate. However, it needs to be said that a few volumes from twenty and thirty years ago have survived, alive and well, because they continue to contribute to the conversation. Among them is *The Homiletical Plot*. This is to say, Gene Lowry brings more than candlelight and music to the same old crust of bread.

Fred B. Craddock

Introduction

There seems to be a wide disparity between “good preaching” as described formally and theoretically, and what happens on Sunday morning when we leave the pulpit with that certain interior knowledge that our sermon “was a good one.” Likely as not we know we violated the “rules” of preaching theory we were taught (or are now learning); yet it happened. The story got told.

We wish we knew what it was precisely that made it happen. Not being able to identify what it is we do when we do well, we are left to happenstance. As Michael Polanyi, the philosopher, describes it: “We know more than we can tell.”¹ If we could just transform our intuitions into articulate form regarding what it is that happens in our best preaching, we could *cause* it to happen by design.

Transforming our intuitions into articulate form is precisely the purpose of this book. In order to accomplish this task two things are necessary. First, we have to lay aside—at least temporarily—many of the cherished norms about sermon anatomy. For example, most books on preaching operate on the common assumption that sermonic organization evolves out of the logic of content. That is, one takes a theme or

topic and cuts it up into equal parts (generally three), and then organizes the parts into some kind of logical order. As such the sermon looks like a “paste-up” even before it appears in the pulpit. We do this because that’s the way we were taught. Even prior to seminary we were taught this way in speech class. More crucially (and subconsciously) our language system teaches us to think this way. So we have been taught the science of sermon *construction* as though we are a strange breed of architectural engineers. This way of thinking and organizing is one of the “cherished norms” we need to lay aside or even engage in battle. But that’s not all!

We need also to form a new image of the sermon—one that is congruent with our best preaching. Truth is, to continue our example, a sermon is not a doctrinal lecture. It is an *event-in-time*, a narrative art form more akin to a play or novel in shape than to a book. Hence we are not engineering scientists; we are narrative artists by professional function.

Does it not seem strange to you that in our speech and homiletical training we seldom considered the connection between our work and that of the playwright, novelist, or television writer? This is most remarkable when you consider that our best preaching does in fact feel like a story. It is indeed *The Story*, and our task is to tell it, to form it, to fashion it—not to “organize” it.

My hope is that whether you are a seminary student just learning the art of preaching and looking for something beyond mechanical rules, or are a seasoned practitioner, perhaps bored and burdened by the regular onslaught on Sunday morning sermon

demands, you will find here a new vision of our common task.

I propose that we begin by regarding the sermon as a homiletical plot, a narrative art form, a sacred story.

Section One

The Sermon
as Narrative



Reading a textbook on how to prepare sermons often is like looking up a word in a dictionary in order to find out how to spell it—you have to have the answer before you can probe the question! So it is that much homiletical advice tends to function in reverse—that is, it works reasonably well in evaluating a sermon already formed, but provides very little help *en route!* We are told, for example, that a good sermon is one that will “command the active attention of every listener.” Fine, but you can’t tell until it’s too late! The dean of homiletical theorists, H. Grady Davis, suggests that a good sermon idea is one which is “generative”¹—that is, one which has natural unfolding power. Most of us know exactly what he means—*after* we see one! But how do you get one?

How to find a “generative idea” is indeed both “first and foremost”—first because that is where we begin in preparing a sermon, and foremost because once the idea is found, the rest of the sermon preparation is easy by comparison. But the question of how to find a generative idea actually involves two quite distinct issues.

The first has to do with how to get started in preparing a sermon. What is going on inside my mind as I pace the floor of my study, trying to get started? What are the dynamics which mark the extraordinary transition from generalized or fragmented “Sunday morning thoughts” into that intuitively felt sense of having something that is alive and ready to be shaped?

The other issue is even tougher: What is the *form* of a homiletical idea? Would I recognize a generative idea if I found one? I am not asking the question of

the *subject* or *topic* of some particular sermon. I am asking about the peculiar characteristic *form* that any subject takes when turned into a sermon. Obviously this question of homiletical form is preliminary to the other because until we resolve the issue of form, it is fruitless to ask how one begins to work toward it.

The Image of the Sermon

All of us have an image of what a sermon is—that is, what factors characterize homiletical form. We learned it automatically, just by being alive and being in church. We do not think *about* this image—we just use it. So quite unconsciously it shapes what we do and how we do it.

For example, we take our language for granted. We do not stop to consider the fact that our language has individual letters that are collected into words, and words into phrases and phrases into sentences, etc. We just do it that way—and presume everyone else does too. But everyone else doesn't! (For example, many languages such as Chinese use pictures or ideograms instead of letters.) And those who do it differently, think differently.

Our language process of collecting little parts into bigger pieces until there emerges an organized whole is described by McLuhan as “the all-pervasive technology of the alphabet.”² Considering the impact of the grammar of our “mother tongue,” J. Samuel Bois, the general semanticist, observes that “we see the world through the meshes of that man-made filter.”³ Says Benjamin Whorf, the linguist:

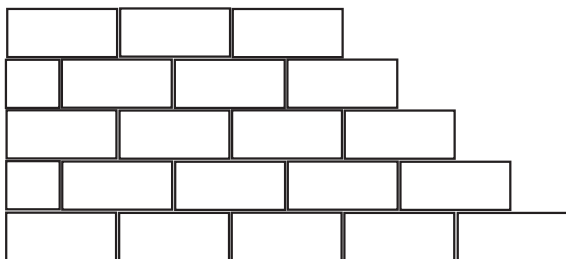
Each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but rather is itself

a shaper of ideas. . . . We cut up nature, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way.⁴

Now what does this have to do with our image of a sermon? A glance at our preparation for last Sunday's sermon will perhaps reveal the answer. In all probability most of us started with scraps of notes—all generally related to a particular theme we hoped to mold into a sermon. And most of us made the same assumption—that if we could just properly organize the scraps of notes, there would emerge an integral whole called a sermon. That's the way we put together our sentences grammatically; that surely must be the way to organize a sermon. Well known to every preacher is the process of looking at a set of preliminary notes and asking "What could I put there?" or "I wonder if an illustration would flesh out this section?" The picture that emerges is that of an amateur carpenter who keeps adding braces here and there to steady a wobbly piece of work. Apparently a similar image occurred to Davis when he noted that this approach produces the "doghouse" sermon.⁵ But the problem is not that we are amateurs and with a little practice will master the process. It is that the whole schema is born of an image of sermon-building as *assemblage* which is founded upon our unconscious understanding of reality as meaningfully related pieces. This is the automatic, and I believe, unfortunate "gift" our language system brings to our sermon work. It is as natural a consequence as is the fact that the industrial revolution with its mass production techniques relying on interchangeable parts is also a phenomenon born in the Graeco-Roman

language world. The similarity between Henry Ford's worker reaching for interchangeable nuts and bolts with which to construct a car and the preacher reaching for interchangeable anecdotes and biblical proof-texts with which to construct a sermon is noteworthy.

In short we have been trained to see the sermon as a *thing*, and hence sermonic formation typically has consisted of organizing the constituent ingredients. The pervasiveness of this image of the sermon can be illustrated by noting what it is that we see in the following illustration. Most of us "see" an incompletable wall—a wall made of bricks or blocks. Our education and language have taught us to see this way, but in a literal (and perhaps banal) sense the illustration doesn't show bricks at all; it shows the mortar—but we tend not to see the connectives.



So likewise, our typical college speech and seminary preaching courses taught us to see things in certain ways—and hence not in other ways. Recall that very likely the emphasis regarding organization was upon the principles of outlining. I remember the lectures on how the various sub-points needed to be parallel to each other and equally subservient to the

larger point, etc.⁶ The entire matter is parallel to the above picture and how we saw it. To look at any outline is to look at a blueprint of organized ideas (a completed wall)—all fit together by a part-to-whole logic. The underlying mentality of such outlining instructions causes the *organizer* to focus upon the *substance* of the various points, but not upon the *transitions* which are the key to sermonic process. It is almost inevitable that we will concentrate on bricks and not notice the mortar.

In his excellent book *As One Without Authority*, Fred Craddock notes the difficulty experienced when trying to preach from such an outline, and asks:

How does one get from 2b to main point II? That is a gulf that can be smoothly negotiated only by the most clever. Looked at geographically, a three-point sermon on this pattern would take the congregation on three trips down hill, but who gets them to the top each time? The limp phrase, “Now in the second place” hardly has the leverage. He who has had the nerve to cast a critical eye on his old sermons has probably discovered that some sermons were three sermonettes barely glued together. There may have been movement within each point, and there may have been some general kinship among the points, but there was not one movement from beginning to end. The points were as three pegs in a board, equal in height and distance from each other.⁷

The fact of “three pegs” serves notice that almost without fail this mentality will see substance, not

movement (and will revere nouns over verbs). This viewpoint will impel us toward organizing sermons on the basis of the logic of their ideational ingredients. But a sermon is not a logical assemblage; a sermon is an event-in-time which follows the logic born of the communication interaction between preacher and congregation. To organize on the basis of the logic of ideational ingredients is to miss altogether the dynamics of that communicational reality. (Imagine what the Prodigal Son story would have been like had Jesus organized the message on the basis of its logical ingredients instead of the journey of the son.)

In preaching seminars I ask participants to play a word association game with two terms: *construct* and *develop*. The composite picture that emerges from words associated with “construct” is that of a building site with pieces of lumber, bricks, iron, etc., off to the side of a hole in the ground, with a hard-hatted man standing next to a small building with a set of blueprints in his hand. He is an engineer and his task is to put the pieces together according to the plan drawn by an architect whose expertise is to know how to design buildings that will actually stand up (science) and in such a way as to make the pieces look like they belong together (art).

The composite picture that emerges from words associated with “develop” is something more akin to a several-time double-exposed picture of a rose blossoming. The words used in this case more often than not are words referring to living organic matter (such as “grow,” “form,” “mature,” etc.).

Note that the term “construct” evokes parts-to-whole expressions and “develop” evokes terms associated with living matter processes not separable into

distinct parts. This striking difference of evoked association with the two terms is the difference between a static collection of inanimate parts put together to look like a whole on the one hand, and on the other, an organic living whole which is not divisible.

Certainly I can tell the difference between a sermon I “constructed” and one which I “developed”! Sometimes a sermon idea seemed to emerge on its own, possessed of its own power, and required a developmental process more akin to *pruning* than *putting together*. Such an idea, says Grady Davis, “produces the sermon by the energy, the vitality inherent in it.”⁸ Like a tree, he continues, its branches are “thrust out by the force of its inner life.”⁹ Generally, with such a sermon idea I have more than enough material and do not find myself adding here and there. Rather, the task is to shape the idea in such a manner as to keep its direction appropriately focused and its integrity from becoming diffused.

I used to feel guilty about the sermon which seemed to have its own demands and desires. Its flow and movement just would not be restricted to three points, and I knew I was violating the principles of sermon making I had been taught! Yet this organic developmental kind of sermon took less preparation time, and it “preached” better.

Precisely the point! Of course I was violating the rules of sermon making—for many years before I had been taught the engineering science of sermon construction! To change the metaphor, I had been taught sermonic architecture (science), had learned to organize the pieces, and had hoped the parts would look like they belonged together (art). They seldom did! No wonder I then began deviating from my

traditional instructions. In the midst of feeling guilty about my new style of forming sermons I began to ask if perhaps the problem was not so much my deviations but rather the instructions, the theories themselves.

Apparently others have had the same experience. Craddock notes that sometimes preachers who have prepared outlines for sermons will depart from them during the actual preaching experiences:

Some have even felt guilty about the departure, feeling they had ceased preaching and had begun to “talk with” their people. Lacking a clearly formed alternative, shabby habits, undisciplined and random remarks have been the result of this groping after a method more natural and appropriate to the speaker-hearer relationship that prevails today. Such casual and rambling comments that have replaced the traditional sermon can hardly be embraced as quality preaching, but the instincts prompting the maneuver are correct.¹⁰

My conclusion is that a sermon ought not be a collection of parts constructed by a preacher, regardless of how we have been taught to think it so. The sermon has its roots in the truth of the gospel which indeed has a life of its own. Our task is the same as that of any artist whose act of discovery, as Eliseo Vivas describes it, is to “extricate the import and order of his experience and body it forth in language.”¹¹ Calling the poet a “mid-wife”¹² Vivas explains that:

The creative process thus involves a search for language [and form] that adequately captures in

and through itself the object that, somehow, until it is successfully captured by language, lies tantalizingly just beyond the reach of consciousness.¹³

Our task in preaching is to facilitate the homiletical birth and development of such an idea grounded in the gospel. Rather than feeling guilty about violating the rules we once learned, we could bring judgment on these principles, recognizing that they are born of a mechanical image of reality. Rather than perceiving ourselves as engineers or architects, we view preaching as an art form and see ourselves as artists. We may be amateur artists or poor artists—but inescapably artists. What is needed badly is a different image of the sermon—one which can do justice to the developmental nature of the homiletical process. If our task is not to assemble parts but to facilitate a process, is there another image which might help us learn better how to do it?

Anyone who has happened to notice that the parable of the Prodigal Son is easier to handle homiletically than 1 Corinthians 13, or that often it is easier to preach from the Old Testament than the New, is not far from discovering another image of the sermon. The reason many Old Testament passages are more easily translatable into homiletical form is that the Hebrew language is a verb-based language and utilizes fewer adjectives and adverbs. Says Robert Roth in *Story and Reality*: “For the Greeks . . . words were definitions. . . . For the Hebrews, on the contrary, words were descriptions.”¹⁴ Hence there is more action or natural movement in *describing*, for example, a God who walks in the garden in the cool of the day than in *defining* a pre-existent Logos. Both

the Prodigal Son narrative and 1 Corinthians deal with the qualities of love, but Jesus' parable uses story form to describe it by means of a father who "had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20) while Paul defines it with the adjectives of "patient and kind" (1 Cor. 13:4). Says Roth: "Stories begin once upon a time. They move through episodes to a climax and then come to an end. . . . Stories move. *They have a plot.*"¹⁵ (Italics mine.)

Suppose we were to ask a playwright to describe what would constitute an idea in that field. The answer would be: "Plot." A drama is an observed process in which a basic discrepancy or tension obtains resolution. The playwright sets us in the middle of an issue which "demands" some kind of remedy. "Propositions with subjects and predicates enter into these stories in an ancillary way," notes Roth, "but meaning arises from the experience of personal involvement in the dramatic action."¹⁶

Likewise, a sermon is a plot (premeditated by the preacher) which has as its key ingredient a sensed discrepancy, a homiletical bind. Something is "up in the air"—an issue not resolved. Like any good storyteller, the preacher's task is to "bring the folks home"—that is, resolve matters in the light of the gospel and in the presence of the people.

Plot! This is the key term for a reshaped image of the sermon. Preaching is storytelling. A sermon is a narrative art form.

In the introduction to his book of modern parables, G. William Jones notes the difference between the story and propositional statement:

The usual tendency for going about this process [of preaching] comes much more from

our Greek progenitors than from our Semitic progenitors. In order to head off all possibilities for misunderstanding, to make the message as “clear” as possible, we shuck it of its lifelike, experiential wrappings and lay it out as an abstract, propositional statement.¹⁷

On the other hand:

[T]here is almost always a sudden change whenever the speaker launches into a narrative. The audience becomes suddenly quiet, forgetting even to cough, sniff, or squirm, as the tale is spun. When they understand that it is over (and that now the speaker will draw his moral, make important announcements, etc.), the change back to coughing, sniffing, and squirming is equally as sudden.

Actually, it hardly matters what kind of story, how good, how funny it is, how moving it is, or how well it is told. There is something almost automatically captivating about a story that catches our minds and makes us forget to breathe until it is over.¹⁸

But his sharp delineation between story and “regular” preaching is unnecessary. Why not conceive every sermon as *narrative*—whether or not a parable or other story is involved? Remembering back to that sermon of yours that really went well: Is it not true that the key to its success had something to do with the terms “plot” and/or “narrative”? Perhaps it was that you put aside your carefully organized notes and simply “talked with the people.” You began wrestling with the issue *with* them. You moved from what

Jones calls “propositional statement” into story. (Note I did not say *a* story.)

Although Grady Davis probably did not intend it so, I believe this is the underlying truth of his statement that “the proper design of a sermon is the design of a time-continuity. And so I shall prefer to speak of the *continuity* or the *movement* of a sermon, rather than of its outline.”¹⁹ The terms “continuity” and “movement” in fact describe a narrative plot. The working through of a sensed discrepancy is what gives a sermonic idea its expansive or generative power.

Recall if you will when you first felt a homiletical idea “happen” to you. There was an excitement you felt, a tension which took hold. And you *knew* even before the sermon was formed, that you had it! At that time the tension perhaps was only latent to the actual sermon, but the tension was evidence of a discrepancy perhaps known only implicitly. In whatever way the sermon worked itself out, it was a matter of a plot moving toward resolution.

A sermonic idea is a homiletical bind; a sermon is a narrative plot!

There is more to be said about the nature of a plot, the various kinds and dynamics, etc., but now that we have identified what a generative idea is (at least in a preliminary way), it is time to return to our initial question of how to get started in sermon preparation. My hope is that with this reshaped model, vision, or image of a sermon as a narrative art form, we shall be better able to explore the dynamics of sermon preparation.