

With Ears to Hear

BY RICHARD WARD

When we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a historical perspective, we keep it at a distance from us and our communities. If it is to be Scripture for the Church, then we must find ways to release its capacity to address us as a living word with voice and presence.

*Obey God's message!
Don't fool yourselves by just listening to it.*
The Letter of James

How many times do you think Jesus *preached* the 'Sermon on the Mount'? Once, twice, or more?" the workshop leader asked us. If this would have been a classroom, my hand would have shot up immediately. My training in the seminary had given me an answer that had served me well in my own ministry: "There was no particular moment in history when Jesus preached the Sermon in this form," I might have said. "Rather, the 'Sermon' represents a compilation of materials drawn from oral and literary sources traced to the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. It's Matthew's sermon, really, shaped from the traditions he had received and aimed at the needs of his own community."

That's the perspective I had to offer. I knew it would set me at odds with the 'literalists' among us but that is not the reason I hesitated to speak it. There was another reason my hand stayed in my lap. The leader's question was having a very different effect: it was taking us out of our familiar ways of experiencing the Sermon on the Mount as print and shifting to its orality. When that happens, other kinds of questions arise.

While my answer might have been 'correct' according to some, it dangerously succeeds in keeping the Sermon on the Mount safely ensconced as an artifact in a distant corner of history. A yawning gap opens between our examining how this text might have been put together *back then* (whether it

was actually preached once by Jesus on some Galilean hillside and faithfully transcribed by a disciple, or assembled by an obscure believer in Antioch named “Matthew” struggling with issues in his own community) and our exploring how the Sermon on the Mount should shape the life of the believing community *in the here and now*. If we listen to it with ears trained only by this historical perspective, we will keep the Sermon on the Mount at a dis-

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tance from us, our communities, and the moment in time in which we are living. If this bit of text—three chapters and about 111 verses—is to become more than a curious artifact, if it is going to become more than a dim light flickering from a distant past, if it is going to become Scripture

for the Church, then we must find ways to release the Sermon’s capacity to address us as a living word with voice and presence.

The emerging discipline of performance criticism can help us listen for and respond to a living word in Scripture.¹ This approach to studying the Bible reminds us that what is at stake is how the Church performs the Sermon on the Mount—not simply how we speak its words in the sanctuary, but how we perform its *way* within the intricate fabric of the human community. Performance criticism does not silence all other interpretive strategies; in fact, in this form of criticism a number of historical and linguistic methodologies converge and find fuller expression. For instance, when we listen to the Sermon, we will hear echoes of performed interpretations within the shared memory of the Church. These living memories can incite and inspire a wide range of performances yet to be seen and heard.

HEARING A SERMON WE’VE NEVER HEARD

Chances are you have never *heard* the Sermon on the Mount read. You have heard excerpts read from it in public worship and perhaps you have read it through a time or two personally (in silence). You certainly have heard sermons that orally interpret it and apply its meanings (in congregations that follow one of the lectionaries, it shows up every three years during the season of Epiphany). Countless books and articles talk about the Sermon and address its significance to the Church as if it were a famous and revered relative sitting quietly in the center of the room.

We talk about it as if it was a sermon, yet our experience of it bears little resemblance to listening to a sermon. Sermons are oral interpretations of biblical texts that give those texts voice and presence in the community by talking about them. Texts like these do not just speak by themselves; they

require the inflection and interpretation afforded by human agency – voice, thought, gesture, and bodily presence – in order to be heard. Usually the agent of interpretation is a preacher who through the sermon generates an oral experiential event, a performed and embodied interpretation of a text, theme, or topic. This “live” transaction between a preacher and a community of listeners in the context of worship brings the resources of Christian tradition to bear on human experience. We know how to listen to a sermon.

But would we even want to listen to the Sermon on the Mount from start to finish? Based on our prior experiences of listening to brief excerpts of the Bible read in worship, the prospect of hearing this much of it read aloud would send many of us scurrying for the sanctuary exits. How could listening to these words attributed to Jesus have much aesthetic merit or ethical value? We have these doubts, I suspect, because our habits of reading aloud rarely allow a text to ‘come alive’ in our hearing. Why is that? It is because *a particular way of hearing the text has been normalized by our liturgical practices.*

For so long both scholars and the Church, for the most part, have neglected the oral/aural roots of biblical texts that we no longer value them as material for performance. We have come to think of biblical texts as silent things that are read and studied in solitude, if at all. When they are given voice, the preferred style of reading tends to flatten affect. In the sincere effort to regard the holy ‘otherness’ of sacred texts and honor the values of the silent, individualized print culture of Protestantism, we have obscured Scripture’s capacity to speak more fully to our human predicament.

Yet the times are changing. Our culture is being transformed by the rapid development of electronic and digital technologies which are decentering writing and print as the primary vehicles for communication. Our standards for “good speech” are changing. Who patiently listens to flat, uninflected, and unexpressive voices anymore when our ears are tuned for energy, conviction, and authenticity? Especially when we think we already understand what is being read to us. Even our notions of “texts” and “reading” are changing; in a sense, they are returning to their first meanings. Dennis Dewey reminds us that the word “texts” originally referred to the spoken word, as in “weaving a tale” or “spinning a yarn.”² Reading (aloud) and listening are being valued anew for the complex activities they are – the comprehension of a gestalt of oral, visual, and kinetic messages that move and flow through our consciousness.

When we are listeners and readers in our communications culture, we draw closer to the situation of our early Christian ancestors’ experience of Scripture. Performances were at the center of the emerging church’s interpretation and appropriation of its developing scriptural traditions.

SHAKING UP OUR HABITS

The performance critic shakes up our habits of reading and listening to Scripture in two ways: by constructing performance scenarios of the early

church and by offering us visions for performing Scripture in our settings. Drawing upon a history of the performance of literature and employing performance conventions of theatre, storytelling, and oral interpretation, the performance critic sets out to create performed interpretations of Scripture appropriate for *our* hearing. Sometimes a person will read a text with attention to the emotional and cognitive affect of its language and structure. In

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other performances, someone may "internalize" the language and form of the text and speak its meaning "by heart."³ Both sorts of performers can present the text as being the Scripture of the Church, as words that are Word-bearing for the gathered assembly.

They will believe the text *authorizes* the performed

interpretations they render, and they will work from some notion of authorial intentionality (believing that Someone behind the text makes it to be authoritative Scripture).

The performer's goal is to "re-oralize" or "transmediaize" the biblical text in the manner of ancient performers, to step into the place of personae in the text and to speak as if their words, attitudes, thoughts, and perspectives were the performer's own.⁴ When a performed interpretation is done well, it is an effective bodying-forth of the thoughts, imagery, and actions found in the text. It restores for listeners a sense that the text is speaking directly to them, just as it spoke to its original audience.

The Sermon on the Mount is a text that was readily performable in antiquity. Its performance would have been a lively affair, full of animation, expression, and movement. Imagine interruptions and exclamations, heads shaking and frowning responses, laughter and long periods of silent attention. Perhaps these ancient performances took place in the afterglow of fellowship around a table where a communal meal had been shared. Perhaps the text as we find it in Matthew's Gospel is representative of a performance history of this material. As oral commentaries and explanations of this material emerged, they might enter the mix and become the more formal modes of speech we call "homilies" or "sermons."

Performed interpretations (as described above) were at the heart of the early Christians' experience of Scripture; they helped to shape the minds, hearts, and memories of believers in relation to Christ. Performance was the agency through which the early Church experienced the lively presence of its Living Lord; performance blurred the line between the Jesus in the text who speaks to disciples in the presence of a crowd gathered on "the moun-

tain” and the Jesus made present in the performed interpretation of the text. Through performance the Church felt addressed by its Sovereign.

A performed interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount will conduct listeners on a journey through the entire text. This journey not only will take us back to a Galilean hillside where Jesus is addressing his disciples in a distant, idyllic past, it will lead us forward to the threshold of what Warren Carter has called “the empire of heaven,” which breaks in whenever we practice what the Sermon preaches!⁵

The journey begins with an act of speaking and listening (Matthew 5:1-2) and moves through widening fields of relationships—first between a rabbi (teacher) and his disciples and then out into the “crowd,” that is, into the realm of everyday, ordinary affairs. We are reminded that the journey will take us through a “narrow gate” (7:13) and that along the way there are dangers and distractions. We can expect persecutors and revilers (5:11), “evildoers” who may strike, sue, or impress one into service (5:39-41). “Enemies” are forever present but so also are the practitioners of a shallow, showy piety, who trivialize the performance of devotion through hypocritical prayer, fasting, and generosity (6:2-4). Such shallow behavior is characteristic of false prophets who seduce the unwitting and vulnerable disciples into illusion, deception, and inauthentic religious practice.

Many phrases remind us that this way of being in the world goes against the grain of conventional behavior and piety. We hear repeatedly, for example, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.” Imperatives everywhere punctuate the Sermon with the sound of confidence and authority. If such notes strike postmodern hearers as the arrogant and self-righteous tune of a bygone age, there are equally confident assurances of Divine Presence along the way, signs that the God of Israel, Jesus, and the Church recognize the struggles of the pilgrim on this path and promise blessedness to those who continue. Virtues practically forgotten in our imperial consciousness—humility, “good” grief that arises out of empathy and compassion, devotion to God, and a passion for making things right—are singled out, honored, and affirmed in God’s commonwealth. Those who practice them are “salt” and “light” (5:13-14), people who live with serious attentiveness and regard for relationships, both human and divine.

UNDERSTANDING THE SERMON

Too often our ears are tuned to hear the Sermon on the Mount as “bland, cliché words of comfort” which disguise the radical economic and political implications of its practices.⁶ Or the more morally earnest among us may hear only a judgmental tone as the imperatives come at us like one-two punches to the gut. The Sermon’s high-minded moral code seems out of reach—way up on the pantry shelf that is nearest to heaven. This verse certainly does not help: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). The whole listening project may shut down right there.

A high school friend of mine was an earnest young man, but his adolescent faith rested on a literal interpretation of the biblical texts. When he came to this verse, bereft of the benefit of critical studies, he threw up his hands and walked away from the Christian faith altogether! Who could be so presumptuous as to assume the “perfection” of God for oneself, he wondered. When read in uninflected voice and without theological insight, these

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words put the Sermon further out of reach, for in English “to be ‘perfect’ means to be entirely without fault or defect,” and we simply cannot be this way and remain human.⁷ The credibility of the entire text is on the line in how we perform this one verse.

Yet in the faithful performance of this verse is the key for listening to the entire Sermon. It can lead

us out of bondage to guilt and defeatism, and into freedom from the social and political systems that keep us locked in fear, privilege, entitlement, and self-absorption. Elements of the text that have been rendered silent and fixed by the print medium can be released into new horizons of meaning through the agency of the human voice and body. So what would a faithful performance of this text look like?

To the performer of any text, “perfection” cannot be reduced to “getting it right” by sounding all the words in their proper order. Indeed, in one of its literal meanings the word “performance” means to perfect, “to carry through to completion.” What is completed through the performance of a text is the thought and intentionality that the performer experiences in relation to the text and carries its *affect* through to completion through sound and gesture. Perfection involves the performer interpreting for an audience in a winsome way what the text means to the performer. But a “finished” performance is never the end of the process of interpretation; it is richly evocative, calling for other interpretations that open up echoes, resonances, interrogations, and appropriations. In the realm of performance, then, “perfection” has the open-ended, evocative quality of an invitation.

Now, consider the Sermon again in light of this meaning of “perfection.” The entire text, punctuated as it is by commands or imperatives, is oriented toward the future. So a better rendering of “Be perfect” is “You will be perfect.” Matthew 5:48 is an invitation to imitate or “carry through to completion” God’s own divine actions.⁸ Just as an informed performance critic is invited to “imitate” the language, thought, and attitude suggested by the

text and “finish” it through an embodied interpretation, we who listen to the Sermon on the Mount are invited to perform a salty, light-bearing way of life that imitates God’s love. The final form of the performed interpretation of this text must be the work of an *ensemble*, the gathered community of God, and not the labor of a solo interpreter.

BECOMING AMATEURS

Performing the Sermon on the Mount can restore a sense of immediacy to our aural experience of the text and build a bridge to the ways that our Christian ancestors experienced it. A bodying-forth of the thoughts, ideas, images, and metaphors interwoven through this text helps us feel addressed by its words. When a performer learns the Sermon “by heart” for our sake as listeners, she models for us a way of committing ourselves to the text and to the Lord who speaks through it to his disciples. Through her performance, the Sermon’s upside-down wisdom makes an immediate claim on our attention.

But what is the purpose of the performance: to make the text more entertaining and our listening more enjoyable, to call attention to the work of the virtuoso performer? Such performed interpretations miss the mark. That mark is the presentation of “a prophetic, covenantal vision for the life of the community in the new empire of heaven.”⁹ The reason we perform this text in church is to evoke performance of this Scripture as the life of the Church.

The final form of the performance of the Sermon on the Mount is not by a small group of virtuosos who are committed to bringing the words of Scripture to life through performance. What brings the Scripture to life in the human community that God loves is the performance of God’s gospel by salty, light-bearing *amateurs*—literally, “ones who love”—who find themselves stumbling through a narrow gate into the empire of heaven.

NOTES

1 David Rhoads coined the term “performance criticism” in his article “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 36:3 (Fall 2006), 118-133. With Thomas E. Boomershine, Joanna Dewey, and others, Rhoads was inspired to build this methodology by Nicholas Lash’s idea that “the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture is the performance of the biblical text” (Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* [London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1986], 42).

2 Dennis Dewey, “Great in the Empire of Heaven: A Faithful Performance of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount,” in David Fler and Dave Bland, eds., *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007), 69-83. See 173, note 2.

3 On the distinction between memorization and internalization, and the different processes involved in preparing performances based on these, see Dewey, “Great in the Empire of Heaven,” 74ff.

4 Thomas E. Boomershine has coined the words “re-oralize” and “transmediaize” in his many lectures and workshops.

5 Quoted by Dewey, "Great in the Empire of Heaven," 78.

6 Ibid.

7 For this insight I am indebted to Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 61.

8 Hare, *Matthew*, 61.

9 Dewey, "Great in the Empire of Heaven," 81.



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