

**“My Passion for Preaching”**  
**Mike Graves**

Anyone who has been around me long enough will have heard me say, “I’m on the planet to teach preaching and to preach.” It’s a rather bold statement, to be sure, but my passion for preaching is equally bold. Inevitably when I meet someone on the golf course or have a conversation on an airplane, the person will ask what I do for a living. My stock reply, “Have you ever been to church and heard a bad sermon? My job is to fix that.” As for how my passion gets translated into the work of research, writing, and teaching, there are several factors that guide my approach, all of them expressed in various ways in the new mission statement of Saint Paul School of Theology.

I believe preaching does indeed **transform the world**, both in terms of calling people to be change agents but also by speaking truth to power. In many cases, our vision has been too small, our sermons too provincial. I challenge students to consider a larger worldview than the congregation(s) where they serve. An emphasis on social holiness and not just personal holiness is essential to a profound ministry of preaching. In an article to be published this next spring, “Deeply Dialogical: Rethinking the Conversation Called Preaching,” I wrote, “Sad to say, but the church has become the homiletical equivalent of so many news outlets, more interested in Britney Spears’s latest exploits than genocide or global warming. This shallowness is something we preachers should talk about.” My teaching of preaching begins with the notion that our agenda must be the same as Christ’s who in his first sermon proclaimed “good news to the poor” as well as “release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18).

I believe preaching does indeed help **make disciples for Jesus Christ** and **renew the church**. Everything I do in my teaching stresses the vital importance of preaching for the life of the church. Every book, article, and lectionary aid I ever wrote has been dedicated to this one idea, **inspiring passion for ministry** among the church’s ministers. But as I noted in my book *The Fully Alive Preacher*, “If preaching is intended to enliven the church, why is it killing so many ministers?” So in my teaching and my writing I have tried to inspire passion among preachers, many of whom have seen it wane over their years of service.

As I do my work of **educating leaders**, I want students to recognize how proclamation is dependent upon every other discipline in the curriculum: history, Bible, theology, ethics, evangelism, pastoral care, denominational studies, polity, and on the list goes. As such, part of my approach is to help them see the interconnectedness of all their seminary training. It’s easy for some students to concentrate on one area to the neglect of others, failing to recognize how all of them will come to bear on their ministries. While I love to chase theological rabbits as much as the next person, graduating students need to be competent in proclaiming the gospel. As a result, my introductory course begins with an exploration of the theological/rhetorical dimensions of preaching but quickly moves to a wide range of how-to topics: studying the text, brainstorming stories and connections, crafting the sermon, as well as embodying the gospel.

And because Saint Paul School of Theology is **rooted in the Wesleyan tradition**, I help students to celebrate and honor that tradition. I encourage them to consider appropriate ways that the content of their sermons might include references to specific Wesleyan doctrines, while gently reminding them that not every message need include a story about John or Charles Wesley. Of course many of our students, like me, come from **diverse Christian bodies** and so I push all of us to ponder the larger Christian family of which we are a part and what that means for ministry in a global age.

At present I'm working on a paper for a joint meeting of the Academy of Homiletics and the Society of Biblical Literature. The paper, "Stakeholders in the Interpretation and Proclamation of Texts: Bridging the Unnecessary Divide between Biblical Studies and Homiletics," is an attempt to foster dialogue between scholars and preachers. The church needs scholars to help her do her work, and scholars need to remember that their work exists for the sake of the church in the world. I'm also working on a book idea that I will draw upon in an upcoming presentation for our Laity School of Theology. The working title is *How to Read the Gospels like a Scholar*. I'm concerned that far too often lay folks don't have access to good scholarly material and far too often scholars forget the laity. If there is any one thing that summarizes my teaching and research it would be this integration of the classical and practical.

I really do believe that I'm on the planet to teach preaching and to preach, that this is God's call upon my life. And I'm grateful to God as well as the administration and trustees of Saint Paul School of Theology for the privilege of exercising my gifts here.

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Recent Books and Articles:

*What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry*, (contributor and co-editor with David Schlafer) Chalice Press, 2008.

*Preaching Matthew*, (co-author with David May) Chalice Press, 2007.

*The Fully Alive Preacher: Recovering from Homiletical Burnout*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

*What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* (editor and contributor) Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Homiletical articles on Mark 1:21-28; Mark 1:29-39; Mark 1:40-45, 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Heb. 10:16-25; 1 Pet. 4:1-8 for *Feasting on the Word*, ed. by Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, Westminster John Knox Press, forthcoming.

"Rhetorical Criticism" and "Comparison," for *New Interpreter's Bible Handbook on Preaching*, Abingdon Press, forthcoming.

"Lessons Learned from My Dentist: Continuing Education for Preachers," *The Clergy Journal* (February 2008), 12-14.