

The Living Voice of the Gospel needs a Preacher

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share the findings of a PhD project in progress, which is based on qualitative research in the field of sermon reception. This paper shall present the provisional analysis of the interviews conducted so far, which aim to establish how churchgoers listen to sermons.¹ This paper argues that, from the empirical results already analyzed, three significant trends can be identified: 1) that the listener relates to the preacher when responding to the sermon; 2) that the sermon is received as an internal dialogue; 3) that faith comes not only from listening to the sermon, but also from relating the sermon to experiences in one's own life. Furthermore, this paper seeks to identify some of the theological implications and questions that the empirical material raises, namely, the incongruence between the empirical findings and the traditional Lutheran conviction of preaching.

The voice is meant to be heard

“*Viva Vox Evangelii*” – the reformatory slogan is drawn to the Scripture and the performance of the living Gospel. The voice is meant to be heard. This is so self-evident that there is no need to argue, investigate or explore this statement any further – otherwise, why use the voice? In Rom 10,17 St. Paul states that “Faith comes from what is heard”, and the foundation of the Christian Church worldwide is that the Gospel is supposed to be preached. The confessional ground for the Evangelical Lutheran Church attributes the sermon an inherently religious function precisely for this reason; because faith comes from hearing. It therefore goes without saying that the living voice of the Gospel is meant to be heard. However, embedded in this self-evident truth is the important question of *how* this voice is heard.

The question of how churchgoers listen to sermons is the subject of the dissertation on which this paper is based. Qualitative interviews with 27 churchgoers from five different churches, and interviews with each of the five preachers, form the foundation of the project. The interviews were organized in the following way: immediately after the sermon, the pastor announced that he or she was participating in this project. As the churchgoers left the service, they were handed a piece of paper with the following three questions: 1. What did you experience in the worship? 2. What did you hear in the sermon? 3. What did the sermon do for you? In this way, the informants (the unpredictable number of people who were willing to give an interview) had the opportunity to write down their answers immediately after the service. These answers formed the basis of the interview, which lasted approximately one hour and took place either the same day or the day after. Only the three questions were asked, but, in the role of interviewer, I responded with empathy and receptiveness, and always followed up interesting statements. Once the interviews had been transcribed, the text was coded according to the principles of grounded theory. Ground theory is an open and exploratory approach to empirical material, which defines the categories of analysis during the work process itself. Therefore, I did not begin the project

¹ Working title: *What the congregation hears: Empirical research on sermon reception in the Communion Service of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark*. The project is carried out under the Industrial PhD program in collaboration with *Folkekirkens Institut for Præstedannelse* (Danish Church Institute for Pastoral Education).

with fixed categories; instead, the coding emerged during the data processing, and the code hierarchy was constructed inductively.

At the very outset of my project, I conducted 90 pilot interviews with listeners of a radio-transmitted worship. In these early interviews, the informants clearly expressed *how* they had listened and experienced the sermon embedded in the entire worship, rather than *what* they had heard. It was remarkable that, in the written surveys, the listeners responded to what they had actually heard; giving report of the parts of the sermon they could remember. However, in the interviews, the informants moved immediately to their own thoughts, saying how they perceived the preacher and what they were thinking in dialogue with the preacher's words, in relation to their own lives and faith.

Recent empirical studies in sermon reception have contributed to a new understanding of preaching as an interactive event, encouraging the listener to create meaning through the dynamic interplay between preacher and listener.² Of course, you cannot come to faith in Jesus Christ without having heard about Jesus Christ, but "the listeners' creative agency and co-authorship in preaching make problematic the traditional Pauline and Lutheran theological convictions that faith comes from hearing."³

The very nature of faith means that it will always be incapable of being accurately mapped or described by empirical studies. Faith will always resist our inherent urge to comprehend, understand and thereby grasp what is out of human control. It is possible that, when using the word "faith", each informant had a different idea of the conceptual understanding and emotional experiences attached to it. However, what is noteworthy is that none of the informants talked about their faith as something that came from listening to a sermon. They all talked about their faith as something given in advance.

The Gospel cannot be heard without a preacher's voice

One of the most significant observations from the early interviews is the great importance the listeners attach to the preacher. This turned out to be a recurrent feature of all the interviews. It was very striking that, without being asked, all the informants brought up the subject of the preacher. And, when asked to respond to the sermon and the worship, they gave their opinion on the *preacher*. Here are some examples of answers to the question: "What did you experience in the worship today?"

52-year-old woman: "a pastor who wanted to prove his academic skills"

91-year-old woman: "I experienced that the preacher was fully in line with my view."

80-year-old man: "Well, first of all I would like to say that I know the pastor, and I think he's a really nice person, so I always like to listen to his sermons"

44-year-old woman: "I experienced a lot of chaos in the church because there were so many small children due to the 3 baptisms. So I think it was hard to concentrate on the very long sermon. The pastor carried on for almost half an hour. It was impossible to concentrate, although I tried really hard. But well... I also saw a friendly and attentive pastor."

Thus the experience of the worship is interwoven with the experience of the preacher. Some of the churchgoers even brought up the subject of the preacher at the very beginning of the interview, without being prompted to do so:

78-years-old man: "Then he (another pastor) had to preach over my wife at the funeral, but he hardly knew who he was about to bury, he said almost nothing about my wife. And then he raised the question about resurrection at a funeral! It was tough. It's alright in an ordinary conversation, but it should not be

² McClure & Allan, et al.: *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*

³ Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, (2012). *Preaching as a Carnavalesque Dialogue –between the 'Wholly Other' and 'Other-wise' Listeners*, p.12. To equate the Paul and Luther is too simplistic, it would probably be more correct to say the Lutheran reading of Paul.

discussed at a funeral. So I decided that I didn't want to listen to him anymore, and came here to this pastor."

63-years-old man: "You are doing a Ph.D. dissertation? M: Yes, exactly, it ... (interrupted) I: I think that's really interesting, because for most people the sermon is a very central element in the worship. I think there are many people... I'm probably not the only one who thought, hmmm that I had been listening to nonsense! It was not worth coming for. Anyway, my personal experience is that attending the service and listening to sermons also requires habituation. But still there are both good and bad preachers."

It is remarkable that, when asked to respond to the sermon and the entire worship, all of the listeners spoke about their experience of the preacher. On average, the informants used 15 percent of the interview to talk about the preacher. It emerged that the informant's assessment of the preacher relied on the following categories: *understanding* the preacher on a conceptual level, the preacher's *own faith* and *personality*, and the informant's *relation to the preacher*.⁴ Here are some examples of the categories listed above:

Understanding the preacher:

32-year-old man: "For me it is also about the preacher as a person and her way of being, for me she is part of a higher power... She has some experience that I don't have, and she can explain things in simple terms, not so airy, so I can understand."

80-year-old man: "Well, I like it when the sermon is preached – how can I say it? – so that everyone understands. There are some pastors moving in circles, which are simply incomprehensible to the layman -you have to be a preacher yourself in order to understand it. You get tired of listening to that."

The preacher's own faith:

60-year-old man: "Well, I was in church today because we are staying in the summer house and it is the icing on the cake, that xxx (name of the pastor) is serving in the church here. For me it has increased the value of our summer house. M: Your summer house is worth more? I: (Laughs) Yes, definitely, because I like listening to a pastor, who, I feel, believes in what she is preaching."

The preacher's own faith combined with the relation to the preacher:

65-year-old woman: "A relation (to the pastor) occurs, a positive or a negative relation. For me, listening to the sermon today, it was - well it could have been worse. But it is not a preacher I want to listen to again. No, it was all too dark. I missed the joy and the spark in his personal faith."

The preacher's personality:

44-year-old man, who had his child baptized: "I noticed that, among our guests, 90 percent were crazy about the preacher. And there was only one person who said that he was very... well, I cannot remember the words he used... but there was just one person, or a couple of people who said they thought the pastor was a little scary (laughs). It was strange to me because I could not share that experience."

46-year-old woman: "And I will say, I know the pastor well, and then you are very open and receptive, I think. M: Knowing her well makes you open and receptive? I: Yes, I think. Well, I find her a lovely person who really invites you to care for her and to listen to her."

It is clear that the listener's reception of the sermon cannot be separated from the preacher. What is heard depends entirely on the speaker. It is as though the communication that takes place within the

⁴ As the interview material is coded inductively, the categories have emerged during the coding process, and are here only listed in random order, and need further analysis.

sermon represents a kind of contact, even though it is only the preacher who is speaking – at least from a phenomenological point of view. A key element in this contact seems to be the relation to the preacher, regardless of whether the relationship is there in advance, or occurs during the service, or specifically in the sermon. Relating to the preacher is clearly an important part of the listening process. However, it is worthwhile to note that what is at stake is linked primarily to *the willingness to listen* – not to faith.

Listening as an internal dialogue

This crucial role for the preacher in the churchgoer's reception of the sermon is probably rooted in the dialogic way in which the churchgoer perceives the sermon. Although the sermon appears to be one-way communication, consisting only of the preacher's voice, from the listener's perspective, it is more likely to be described as a dialogue, where the preacher's voice becomes only *one* voice among others. This is not simply a linguistic approach to the sermon; it is much more a practice and embodiment of dialogue, situated within the entire worship. The preacher is important because the churchgoer (if listening at all) allows the preacher's voice to play a part in their internal dialogue. Why assign 'speaking time' to someone, who is not saying anything relevant and meaningful for your life?

What the churchgoer hears is always situated and cannot be isolated from a certain context, which, as explained, includes the preacher and also the specific worship. The reception of the sermon is interwoven with the entire church service, and, when the informants discussed their experience of the sermon, they referred in various ways to text readings, music (including the singing of hymns), baptisms, communion, other churchgoers and even the church building itself. All of these phenomena are experienced as a polyphony of impacts, which converge in the reception of the listener and contribute to an internal dialogue.⁵ When asked what they *heard* during the sermon, the informants replied with what they had been *thinking* in relation to what they experienced, referring to their internal dialogue – and this was regardless of whether the sermon was confirming, contradicting or causing associations. This is illustrated by the following examples:

32-year-old man: "It's not so much what she said that matters to me. M: So what matters to you?"

I: What matters is – I listen and look into myself and see what it can give to me. So it gives me permission to be who I am. It gives me hope that I can be forgiven, no matter what I've done in my life."

46-year-old man: "Yes, it was a very interesting interpretation. But... arhhh, it's probably not so simple, but a very interesting observation, (laughs) yes."

63-year-old woman: "I remember she talked about a woman she knew. I wondered if it could be true that she knows someone like that, or that there are people like that – people who never ask for help. For sure it must be terrible to be like this, I thought. Well, you sort of refer to your own experience, and you ask yourself, 'do I really know someone like this?' I don't think I do, it cannot be true – nobody can be like this. But, well, they might be. But it must be awful to think you can do everything yourself, I thought."

65-year-old woman: "I thought 'oh no, no, not only the judgment from God, oh no! Stop it now, that's just typical'. M: Yes? I: Then I thought, 'Oh how dark it is, it's simply too dark' ... throughout the entire sermon I was thinking of the poor guests coming to participate in the child's baptism, and the kids playing around ...but he went on and on and on, I wished he would just stop..."

⁵ This polyphony of voices in the listener's reception is theoretically described in Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen's PhD thesis, *Preaching as a Carnavalesque Dialogue -between the 'Wholly Other' and 'Other-Wise' Listeners*, 2012, in her interpretation of the Russian dialogue philosopher, literature critiques and communication theoretician, Mikhailovich Bakhtin.

The listening process is thus best described as an inner conversation, where the preacher's voice is critically assessed and evaluated in relation to the churchgoer's own experiences, like an interlocutor in an ongoing internal dialogue about faith. The listeners usually selected only a few sections of the sermon, and sometimes even exported them from one horizon of understanding to another, matching their personal frame of reference. None of the informants recounted the entire sermon; only small parts, often only fragments, which were incorporated into an internal dialogue, which centered around the listener's current life situation and/or life experiences.

Identification provides listening

On the whole, the informants remembered and referred to the parts of the sermon that identified with their own, personal lives. This is most clearly demonstrated by the interviews with four informants who are currently serving time in prison. All four informants referred to the same part of the sermon. The pastor said:⁶ "Something happened to God, when he had a son. God was struck by something when he became a father. God was struck by something - so big that later he was not quite the same as before. This transformation, I recognize from my own life - the very first time holding a baby in my hands - what joy - what a feeling in the body - indescribable - as if I was full of something beyond usual life. And right there I knew, I would never be the same again - something had changed inside me. And so is it with the good Lord too." The informants had picked up on and were discussing the *transformation* of God; from his tyrannical behavior in the Old Testament - punishing people with different languages at the Tower of Babel, to being a better 'person' in the New Testament, having entered fatherhood. It was not being a father that the informants identified with, but God's transformation of behavior. This was remarkable because 'becoming a better person' was a key issue for all the four informants and their current life situations. It was this topic that proved to be the focal point of the interviews.

The identification rarely - not to say never - occurred in relation to abstract theological concepts, but mostly in relation to the listener's personal experiences, and particularly to the part of the sermon that created images in the informant's minds. Very often it was the narrative parts of the sermon that created pictures in the listener's imagination and which provided identification. More often than not, the picture painted by the preacher in the sermon was developed further by the listener, making the sermon more suited to the listener's experiences. In this way, the listener was the co-author of the sermon.

An example of this is a sermon about Lazarus and the rich man (Luck 16,19-31). During this sermon, the preacher spoke about the gap between Heaven and Hell. Whilst listening to the sermon, the informant filled imaginary water into the gap, even though he knew that it was not part of the preacher's sermon. But it was important for him, he explained, to get from one place to another, from Hell to Heaven, and, for him, this was made possible with water in the gap. For the listener, the crucial analogy in the sermon was the preacher's claim that it was possible to look from one place to another. The informant identified Hell with loneliness - this was his own interpretation, not the preacher's - where the lonely person could look at people who were in a community in Heaven. He described how he, as a child, had experienced loneliness and felt isolated, and experienced the gap between him and people in the community. So it was important for him to find a way out of the loneliness, and to become a part of the community. In his imagination, this was made possible by Jesus adding water to the gap, and, for him, this water represented forgiveness.

Distinct from the listeners' tendency to continue working on an image of the sermon, they never referred to or elaborated on those parts of the sermon in which preachers talked abstractly, unless there was at

⁶ She preached over Gen 11.1- 9 (The tower of Babel in the Old Testament) and John. 14,22-31(Jesus predicting the coming of the Holy Spirit).

least something to appeal to the imagination. An example of this is when an informant referred to part of a sermon in which the preacher was talking about the hope of the resurrection. The preacher said: “Why did Jesus die? Well, the world’s theological discussion on this subject may never end. But if I have to say it very simply, then it was in order to be able to open up the gates to Paradise for us. Right now in this life, so that we do not have to live without the fellowship with Jesus -and after death in the belief that eternal life awaits with him.” Only one informant out of five, a 44-year-old man, commented on this part of the sermon, saying: “Jesus has opened the gates for us, and he was the son of a carpenter [...] and now the gate is open, it’s made out of wood, and can actually open both ways. It is not just such a gate only going one way; it’s more like a saloon door going both ways.” The informant needed Jesus right here in his life. He then continued to describe the challenging circumstances in his life currently. The churchgoer painted his own ‘gate to paradise’ as a saloon door in his imagination, so Jesus could return immediately afterwards.

In the interviews, the preacher’s words were always deeply embedded in a certain context and heard in relation to the listener’s personal life. Whether the listener’s views were confirmed, contradicted, or just mentioned or elaborated upon, the reception was dialogical and related to the churchgoer’s current life situation.

Relating to life is essential for faith

When the informants talked about the preacher’s role in relation to the sermon reception, it was, as earlier stated, *never* a question of whether the sermon had evoked their faith, but a question of the willingness to listen to the specific sermon. Another vital key for the willingness, or maybe better, the ability to listen seems to be *relating to life experience*. The informants report from the sermon what they can relate to in their own context of experiences. As one of the informants said: “Why listen to an advertisement for something you can’t buy”. Why listen to a sermon, which has no relevance for your life – and this relevance seems to occur when the listeners can relate the sermon to things they have experienced in their own life. When the churchgoers talked about what had nourished their faith (spontaneously, without being asked) they referred to personal experiences and understandings, which the words of the sermon or the worship could re-describe or frame. Here are some examples:

A-47-year old woman said she was sitting in an ambulance beside her daughter, who was in mortal danger after a car accident. She had said the Lord’s Prayer, and suddenly she understood the meaning of the words “Thy will be done”. “For the first time in my life I found myself in a situation, where I could not manage my life as I wanted to, but had to rely on the will of God.” She knew the prayer, but had not been touched by the words until they were activated by a life experience. The informant pointed to this episode as vital for nurturing her faith. For her, the inherent religious function of hearing the word was not limited to the church service, hearing the sermon and saying the Lord’s Prayer, but unfolded in the very center of her life.

A-63-year old man: M: “You have written (answering the question ‘What did you experience in the service?’) ‘A deep joy unfolding in-between the hymns and the text’. The joy is stemming from the worship? I: Yes, yes. (Long pause). Yes, but it is uh... of course it is a joy, (pause) of being accepted. M: Yes - of being accepted? (Pause.) Did you experience this in the worship yesterday? I: I will say, I do, every time I go to worship. M: Being accepted? I: Yes. (Pause)It may well be, that it is not spoken aloud, or is a part of the sermon, but (said hesitantly after a long pause) well, it’s a part of my understanding of Christianity.” The informant then talked about his feeling of not being accepted in daily life. The experience of being accepted in the worship, with the climax in the Eucharist, had great significance for his faith.

A-53-year old woman working as a nurse in a hospice: “I have great difficulty understanding sermons. I'm not particularly gifted, I'm not intellectual, but I'm not particularly stupid either, but I don't understand sermons in general. And I did not understand the pastor today. But the small part I understood, I brought with me – it's when you are in difficult situations surrounded by death and things like that, then you really experience life and that you are living, and life gets so intense - because I recognize this from my work.” Here, the informant expresses something characteristic of all the interviews; she only heard the part of the sermon which she could immediately relate to her own experience, namely, her job at the hospice.

To summarize briefly, the sermon is experienced as polyphony of voices, which form an ongoing, internal dialogue about faith, which is deeply rooted in the listener's current life situation. The preacher's personal interpretation of the Gospel is only one of these voices. The churchgoers listen to the part of the sermon with which they can identify and relate their own experiences. When the informants talk about their faith, it is never something which results from listening sermons, but is more likely to be given in advance, and then nurtured and shaped by life experience, which the sermon can re-describe. So, according to the empirical material, faith does not come from hearing a sermon, but from relating what is heard to one's own life experiences.

Theological conviction and practical experience are out of step

It might not come as a surprise that the preacher herself plays such a crucial role in the listeners' experience of preaching and worship. It is an everyday experience that the speaker is important for the speech. It was documented by Aristotle 2500 years ago in his *Rhetoric* that ethos has the greatest appeal of the three appeal forms, and we know from our general, profane communication, as well as from rhetorical and communication theories, that form cannot be separated from content.⁷

However, from a traditional Lutheran point of view, this is a problematic conclusion (and for the preacher himself it may also be a frightening and unpleasant claim). “A protestant theology of the sermon entails the conviction that in preaching the listener interacts with 'the Word of God' in, through, and beyond the discourse of the preacher.”⁸ For the theological thinking shaped by this theocentric understanding of preaching with God as the Divine Agency, it makes no sense – it is even blasphemous – to assert that the preacher plays an overwhelming role in the reception of the sermon for the listeners. Obviously, the attention should focus on the 'Word of God', and not on the preacher's personality! Most preachers do not wish to stand in the way of the Gospel. And some pastors may argue that it is too much responsibility, his or her personality should not be expected to compensate for society's lack of faith. So, from this theological point of view, assuming that faith comes from hearing the Word of God, it is nonsense to attribute the preacher with the responsibility of the reception of the sermon.

However, something appears to be out of step, for empirical evidence cannot be controlled by theology, just as praxis cannot be controlled by theory. One of the informants bears witness to this problem herself. She was interviewed directly after a radio-transmitted worship. When asked what she had heard in the sermon, she replied that, in general, she did not like sermons, and she did not want preaching to be a part of the service! When asked why, she replied that she and her husband always ended up discussing the preacher after the service, which was completely wrong – the focus should, of course, be on the voice of the Gospel, and not the preacher's voice. Her theology did not fit with her own experience of listening. So, even for somebody who understands that preaching is a divine and not human activity, the preacher's personality was of the utmost importance for the reception of the sermon.

⁷ Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Book A II4, Book B, I, XII, XVII

⁸ Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in hearing Sermons*. 2010, p.1. This theological starting point avoids the discrepancy between empirical experience and theological theory.

It definitely emerges as a dilemma – but the question is whether something in the traditional concept of preaching needs to be adjusted.

There are some underlying assumptions at work in the theological conviction that “the listener interacts with 'the Word of God' in, through, and beyond the discourse of the preacher”. It presupposes a one-way movement from the 'Word of God', as presented in the biblical texts that understands the preacher as a 'neutral medium' to the listeners as passive receivers. This theological perception distinguishes sharply between Divine and human agency in preaching and builds upon an understanding of communication as transferees of information. It is also based on an understanding of the human being as isolated and not related to other subjects and is not dealing with the notion of relationally. In other words, there are three things at stake in the traditional interpretation of the Lutheran understanding of preaching: a particular *Image of God* (God as separated from human agency), a *communication theory* (the transfer model, which involves one-way-communication), and a specific *anthropology* (the subject defined as individual rather than relational). But the incongruence between the findings in the qualitative research and the theological ideals calls for a more nuanced understanding and further theological reflection upon these basic assumptions.