

The Life within Preaching: the preacher as the carpenter or the tool?

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In my paper I will present the notion of the Third Room which can bring new perspectives in understanding how listeners create meaning when hearing the sermon. It is the result of an empirical research utilizes qualitative interviews. The encounter between the listeners' experience and the preachers' words facilitates a third room in which the listeners, in internal dialogue, create a surplus of meaning that was previously not present in either the preacher's intent or the listener's frame of reference. Thus the semantic meaning is not embedded only in the words that the preacher speaks but is emerging in the situation. The preacher cannot control the production of meaning, but the production of meaning is activated by the preacher which can look like a paradox. I will argue, however, that this emerging life within preaching can be considered both as a premise, a relief and a promise.

The teacher in homiletic stands in front of the students in the auditorium, on the desk lays a systematic theological well-prepared and profound manuscript. He has been working hard to make his points clear and comprehensible; his points of views are substantiated with classical theological sources, Augustine, Luther and Bonhoeffer. He has really made an effort to get the students to understand his message. During the lecture he asks the students several times: "Do you see, what I mean?" The only expected answer is of course "yes", but after the lecture, one of the students rises her hand and asks a question revealing that she does not understand his thinking. The homiletic teacher becomes frustrated and annoyed as the student obviously has not understood his thoughts. Upset he replies: "You have totally misunderstood what I've just said".

He takes it for granted, that the role as a teacher is to provide his homiletical understanding to the students. Besides blaming the student for not being able to understand his way of thinking the teacher subconsciously assumes that it is possible to transfer his thoughts to the students – as if an understanding from one consciousness can be transferred to another – the so called transfer model. Since Wittgenstein's language philosophical statement about words not having an isolated meaning by themselves, but primarily a use in a *context*, the traditional notion of communication as a one-way transfer from an active speaker to passive listeners, has theoretically been deconstructed several times. In practice, however, the transfer model continues to be quite resistant popping up everywhere in contemporary homiletics – probably because of the lack of an alternative communication model or a communication theology to explain fully the preaching event. The communication paradigm seems to be very persistent and hard to overcome in practice – both in the teaching situation as well as in the preaching event.

It is often taken for granted in much homiletical discourse and literature that the preachers' role is to provide an understanding of the Gospel at a semantic and cognitive level to the listeners. How can the preacher proclaim the Gospel so the congregation understands God's promise within the paradoxes of life? What can the preacher say from the pulpit in order to make the churchgoers come to an adequate understanding of who God is, what Gods offers and requires of us or how God operates in this complex world full of paradoxes and suffering? How can the preacher make the congregation comprehend the good news of the Gospel proclaimed in the sermon? Or just basically how can the preacher make the community understand the Gospel? It is taken for granted that the preacher like the teacher can use words as a tool in order to create an understanding. But what if it is not the case?

Qualitative research investigating the sermon listening process challenges some of the most taken-for-granted homiletical/rhetorical axioms as the listeners' *understanding* of the Gospel does not seem to be the most important.¹ From the perspective of the pew the preaching event is not primary about understanding the Gospel or the sermon. The encounter between the listeners' inner experience and the preachers' outer words facilitates, what I call, *a third room* in which the listeners, in internal dialogue, create a surplus of meaning that was previously not present in either the preacher's intent or the listener's frame of reference. Thus the semantic meaning is not embedded only in the preachers' words but is emerging in the entire situation. The preacher cannot control the production of meaning but must surrender to the preaching event. Thus the preacher is not the carpenter of the Third Room, but the Third Room is depended upon the preachers' willingness to serve as the tool.²

This emerging life within preaching can be considered as a problem or a premise; a challenge or a relief; a paradox or a promise. After having spent so much time, made such an effort and worked so hard to communicate your understanding, in the homiletical lecture or in the sermon – or writing this paper – it can be experienced very frustrating that communication is just not a transfer of meaning by a source sending a message through a channel to a receiver. I will, however, suggest that it is both a *premise a relief* and a *promise* in a life full of problems, challenges and paradoxes. In the following I will explain why.

¹ Empirical studies in a Danish church tradition influenced by dialectical theology, assuming that there is no such a thing as a point of contact between God and human, humans' experiences, has often been met with resistance. The core of the resistance is the assumed subjectivity embedded in the theological notion of no point of contact between human and God. But the subsequently distinction between a theocentric and an anthropocentric perspective is ignoring the epistemological starting point that theological discourse is bound to human reasoning. By acknowledging our own participation in doing theology the distinction between a theocentric and an anthropocentric perspective breaks down.

² I primarily relay upon the result of my Ph.D.-dissertation, *Den emergente prædiken*, (*Titel in English: The Emergent Sermon*) an empirical research of sermon listening in the Danish church context (presented in the book: *Prædikenen som det tredje rum*, 2015 (English title: *The sermon as the third room*). The results are compatible with the findings in similar current research project "Forkynnelse for Små og Store" (English title: "Preaching to Young and Old) made by a research group from MF Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo, and the comprehensive North American empirical study *Listening to the listeners to sermon project*, led by Ronald Allen from 2001-2002.

The premise of preaching event from the perspective of the pew³

The results of empirical research of sermon listening indicate that the premise for preaching – and I will argue for teaching and lecturing as well – is that the speaker cannot transfer meaning to the listeners, as the listeners interpret the speakers' words and create meanings in their process of reasoning. This meaning-making-process can on one hand not be controlled by the speaker, but on the other hand it is depended upon the speakers' person. To deepen this break down of the transfer model and the presupposed premises, I will have to present the empirical research of how churchgoers listen to sermon.⁴

“If I do not have sympathy with the preacher, the sermon can be good or bad, it does not make an impact upon me.”

The most notable is that listeners attribute to the preacher a crucial role in their sermon and worship experience by their experiences of the preacher's *authenticity* and *attitude* toward the listeners.⁵ The preacher is perceived as authentic when having integrity, being personally committed and engaged and true to her own faith. It does not seem to be so important whether the churchgoers can identify themselves with the preacher's theological perspective, faith or church tradition as the listeners do not take over the preacher's point of view. If the preacher is having open minded, respectful and non-judgmental attitude towards the congregation it supports the listening process, whether the listeners agree or disagree with the preacher's interpretation of the text. The preacher's theological stance and academic knowledge of course has impact on the churchgoers, but this is subordinate to their desire for an authentic and committed preacher with an open minded attitude toward the congregation. Theological skills and knowledge is appreciated as long as it is communicated in an understandable way for the churchgoers.⁶ Thus the personal connection with the preacher is directly related to the impact of the sermon.

“I can feel when the preacher has something at stake and is moved by the texts – then I'm moved too and dare to risk anything as well.”

³ The inspiration to my empirical research grows out of the listener-centered approach to preaching and listening embedded in The North American movement The New Homiletic and Other-wise preaching with their embedded sub-assumptions about the listening process. These assumptions are typically based upon theoretical understanding that is articulated within the theory and then applied to interpreting the listener's experience. The traffic travels one way on the bridge of interpretation – the theory is used to explain what happens when people listen, but the researcher seldom attends to what actually happens in the act of listening from the perspective of the listener. Indeed, for a generation Fred Craddock spoke about sermons being “open-ended” in order to allow the listener to draw out the meaning of the sermon. But even Craddocks' inductive communication strategy presupposes that the preacher has the power to give the listener permission to create their own meaning. I argue that the preacher is not in possession of such power that she or he can assign the listeners their freedom – they have that freedom in advance. Craddock and many of his theoretical successors are presupposing the transfer model – just in a more subtle way.

⁴ The following empirical results of my research I also have presented briefly in a paper “The emerging sermon” at the Academy of Homiletic, Annual Conference in San Diego, USA in 2014.

⁵ I briefly touch upon the importance of the preacher's ethos for the listeners' interaction in the article: “The Living Voice of the Gospel needs a Preacher” in *Viva Vox Evangelii – Reforming Preaching*. *Studia Homiletica* 9, (Germany, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), 181-192. A more profound analysis is presented in the Danish article “Praediken som subjektiv meningsproduktion. Forholdet mellem praedikant og kirkegaenger” (English title: The sermon as subjective production of meaning. The relation between preacher and churchgoer) in *En gudstjeneste – mange perspektiver*, (Denmark, Frederiksberg: Forlaget Anis 2013), 111-142.

⁶ It is worth noting that the minister's sex, age, appearance, length of service or authority established through ministry were not topics discussed by the churchgoers.

The experience of an attentive and authentic preacher activates an honest and authentic response within the listener. The interviewed churchgoers indicated that they are more likely to be moved when they sense the preacher to be moved by the text. Thus, the preacher's commitment and personal faith affect the listeners' commitment and interaction with the sermon. The preacher who invests herself in the sermon implicitly invites the churchgoers to invest themselves as well. While the listeners' understanding is beyond the preacher's control, it seems that the preacher's engagement and passion enables a reciprocal relationship with the listeners.⁷

“Listening is like descending into a reflexive room in which I have a dialogue with what is going on in the worship [...] and why should I participate in that dialogue if the person communicating not speaks from his heart or have something on his mind?”

The reciprocal relationship imbedded in the entire worship sets the frame for the listeners' interpretation of the sermon content. The listeners' understanding is based upon an internal dialogical interaction activated by the words of the sermon. The preacher can thus be described as an interlocutor, a theological reflector stimulating the internal dialogue. The inner dialogue is not only constituted by the preacher's voice, but can best be described as a polyphony of voices circling around themes from the listener's personal life. This dialogical interaction is constitutive of the churchgoers understanding and experience of the sermon. On the one hand, the preacher has no control over the listeners understanding of the sermon, and on the other hand, the preacher is stimulating this understanding.

“Sometimes I exit into another story about how the text should be interpreted [...] and I think that is how it should be understood.”

I identified three different types of internal dialogue categorized as associative, critical and contemplative interaction.⁸ These three different interactions rarely appeared isolated. More normally the listeners dynamically move back and forth between the different kinds of interaction. Typically the preacher's words activate associations within the listeners which they relate to their own life experiences and preconceptions.⁹ These associations are fundamental for the listeners' understanding. It is these associations which the churchgoers subsequently refer to when they are talking about the sermon. Only to a limited extent do the churchgoers remember the 'real' words of the sermon. An interesting phenomenon of the associative interaction is that the worshippers themselves create new questions in their minds – although this may not have been the preacher's intention.¹⁰

⁷ The 'Listening to Listeners to Sermons Project has a similar result: They “discovered that sermon listeners hear more and hear better when they believe they can relate to their preacher in meaningful ways.”

⁸ For a more detailed explanation of the three dialogical interactions see: Marianne Gaarden & Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen: “Listeners as Authors in Preaching - Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives” in *Homiletic*, June 2013: <http://www.homiletic.net/>

⁹ The research project in Norway has also similar observation and the North American Listeners to Listeners of sermon project: “Listeners are prone to take even single words and phrases and place them alongside some ordinary experience in their everyday life. They are experimenting with theological world and worldviews on the spot trying on metaphors images and ideas like garments, adopting some and rejecting others.”

¹⁰ The internal dialogue can be seen and interpreted in the light of Bakhtin theories of dialogicity presented by Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, *Dialogical Preaching. Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics*, 2014

“I also like when there are other ideas in the sermon, which I do not agree with, as it provides an opportunity for me to reflect.”

The critical dialogue is activated when the preacher's interpretation and understanding of the text is not consistent with the listeners' interpretation. The clash between the words of the sermon and the churchgoers' inner convictions and pre-understandings activates a critical interaction giving birth to new understanding. It seems like understanding and recognition comes to fruition in the critical response. A critical interaction is not at all identical with a negative perception of the preacher, or a lack of willingness to interact with the sermon. Rather, the churchgoers expressed that they appreciate being *disturbed* in their pre-understandings, and for some of the churchgoers that even is their motivation to attend worship. A preacher's different and for the listener challenging interpretation of the text is encouraging and stimulating the listeners' personal understanding by means of the critical dialogue.

“It is as if I hear the words and I think I know what has been said, but afterwards I cannot remember anything.”

The associative and the critical interactions seem to be the most frequent, or simply just the easiest to identify. There are, however, also indications of a third mode of interaction categorized as the contemplative. It seems to be difficult for the listeners to explain what happens during the sermon, because one dimension of what they are experiencing is merely a state of being without thought and beyond words. The listeners think they have heard the sermon, but they cannot recall what they heard. Typically they could respond like: I like the sermon, but I cannot remember it. In these instances, it is easier for listeners to explain what the contemplative interaction has done to them – leaving them with a sense of peace, relaxation, stillness and silence. From a phenomenological perspective, worship is full of words, text readings, hymns, prayers and the sermon. So I interpret the silence the listeners refer to as referencing their state of being.

“The sermon only makes sense for me when the preacher relates to some things that I can recognize to from the life I live.”

The churchgoers do rarely identify with the preacher's interpretation of the text and, as they are situated in different contexts in front of the text and with different point of views.¹¹ The internal dialogue is based on the churchgoers' current life situation and personal experience, thus the starting point for the listening process and creation of meaning of course is the listener's own life. The importance of the listener's current life situation cannot be overestimated for their understanding and interpretation of the Biblical text.¹²

¹¹ The Danish exegete Gitte Buch-Hansen operates with an exegetical interpretation key distinguishing between the world behind the text, the world within the text and the world in front of the texts. If the preacher highlights the world behind the texts the preacher's role is as the expert teaching his congregation the correct understanding of the Bible. If the emphasis is on the world within the text, the preacher's role is as a poet or storyteller creating new meaning in the text. If the accent is on the world in front of the text, the preacher's role is as a pastoral care-giver inviting her congregation to create meaning in dialogue with the text. *Biblen I gudstjenesten* (title in English: The use of the Bible in the worship), Copenhagen University 2015.

¹² An example of the importance of the situative a starting is Nigerian female sex workers in Copenhagen who have been interviewed about their understanding of the Bible. They identify with the exodus story and understand their past in Nigeria as

The heard sermon is merging with the life experiences which the listeners are bringing into church. The sermon can add something external which can confirm or move the churchgoers from their starting point, but in order to do so, the sermon needs to make sense by being related to the listener's own experience. Typically, it is just one single issue or theme in the current life situation that dialogues with the sermon material. It can be only one little fragment of the sermon or maybe a fragment from the worship that enables this interaction. Thus the accent is on the situated subject creating meaning in dialogue with what is heard on the basis of their own life. Consequently, the words of the sermon are not attributed meaning until they are used in relation to the churchgoers' personal experience. The listeners' experiences within a congregation obviously vary widely, and thus sermon reception within a single congregation also varies.

Fragments of the sermon, mixed with other impressions from the entire worship are used in a dialogical reasoning process in which the fragments are put together in new ways in order to make sense of the listeners' experiences. Based on the churchgoers' personal experiences, they generate new meaning in dialogue with the words of the sermon removed from the preacher's semantic understanding and implemented in the churchgoers' universe. The external words can disturb and provoke the churchgoers' preconceptions with the result that new insights and realizations suddenly can emerge and create new meaning, often quite distant from the preacher's intention. In this way the sermon can be seen as an inter-subjective production of meaning.¹³ According to the empirical research, this new meaning created by the churchgoers can be very evangelical and include deep theological insights which the preacher does not intend and has not articulated.

The result of the listeners' production of meaning is thus a new semantic meaning of the sermon. This new sermon content is not identical with the preacher's intended meaning, and it cannot be ascribed to churchgoers' experience alone. It is definitely dependent on the participants, but at the same time there is a surplus of meaning which cannot be explained only by the contribution of participants.¹⁴ There is something else that emerges in the situation. The new sermon is more than the sum of listeners' experience and the words of the preacher, or, to put it another way, the logic seems to be $1 + 1 = 3$.¹⁵

the time of slavery in Egypt. Now they are in the desert where their stamina is tested by the Lord. The temptation is to give up prostitution by which they economically are able to support their broken families back in Nigeria. For those who remain at the Lord's way - how incomprehensible this way may seem - the Gospel is the Promised Land which is not their home country but a legal residence in Denmark and an ordinary job. The interviews is made by Sigrid la Cour Sonne's as a part of her thesis, *I am because we are*. *Nigerianske sexarbejdere på Vesterbro og deres forhold til Biblen*, Copenhagen University 2015.

¹³ The empirical research can be illuminated by the communication theory of Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Making of Social Worlds* from 2007, belonging to the social constructionist paradigm where communication is to be understood as production of meaning. Social worlds are experienced through the subject who is interpreting the perceived reality. Pearce's communications model is called "Coordinated management of meaning" (CMM).

¹⁴ This surplus of meaning is more than the hermeneutic phenomenological approach presented by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, from 1976, as it can transcend a cognitive level and can be experienced as a contemplative state of being. The concept of a surplus of meaning is closer to the Danish philosopher Dorthe Joergensens', definition: "...the concept of 'immanent transcendence' is, indeed, very meaningful because it refers to a specific experience, and an experience that anyone may have, namely when we feel as if the world suddenly opens up and allows a *surplus of meaning*, i.e. intensified meaning, to open up." Dorthe Joergensen, *Transfiguration*, "The experience immanent transcendence" 2010 2010/2011 p. 33-50

¹⁵ This logic $1+1=3$ is the core of emergence theories. The word *emergent* derives from the Latin word *emergence*. In philosophy, system theory, science and art the concept of emergence denotes the way complex systems and patterns can arise out of a

In the following way the Third Room concretized my attempt to understand and interpret the inter-subjective creation of meaning in the sermon reception in the interviews: The encounter between the churchgoers' inner experience and the preacher's outer words situated in the liturgical setting of the worship facilitate a room for a new production of meaning. Thus a surplus of meaning emerges right on the spot in a liminal and ritually shaped space which I named *the Third Room* of preaching. It is activated by the participants but neither the listener nor the preacher can control or occupy the room, but engage in and surrender to it. Of course the situation – the entire worship with readings, prayers and indeed music, hymns, chorus take part in facilitating the third room in which the new sermon can emerge, and the process even can continue after the worship. Facing life events, the words of the sermon suddenly can reappear and give new meaning as an interpretation and understanding of a current situation in life.

With this understanding of the sermon the preacher must surrender to the preaching event and give up the idea of controlling the production of meaning related to the sermon. According to the empirical research the preacher cannot use words as a tool in order to create a certain understanding among the listeners – without being the tool him- or herself. Thereby the preacher's ethos becomes a part of the preaching event.¹⁶ This is the premise of preaching seen through the empirical lenses.

This empirical understanding of the emerging life within preaching breaks down the implicit communication theory of homiletics that assumes the purpose of preaching is a semantic transport of the preachers' understanding of the Gospel to the listener. The empirical homiletic radically rejects the notion that preaching is primarily about the listener receiving and understanding what the preacher says. The empirical approach shifts the focus from preaching to preacher, from cognitive understanding to creation of meaning, from transference of meaning to participating in the incarnation of the Gospel. The sermonic event offer this opportunity by establishing the Third Room in which can emerge the creation of a surplus of meaning, or a contemplative state of being in dialogical interaction with the preachers' authentic voice and an internal polyphony of voices.

The relief for preaching event from the perspective of the pulpit

The focus on the preachers' authenticity and personal faith can for many Lutherans be a stumbling block in a North European preaching context influenced by the dialectical theology. Preachers are aware that the Gospel should be the focus of the sermon – not the preachers' person, as it is not due to the preacher to inspire faith – only to the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Therefore, there is a tendency to consider

multiplicity of relatively simple interactions. New features can be formed or occur in a complex system that cannot be explained by the individual's properties. The whole is more and greater than the sum of the single parts. Thus emergence appears as a result of a process whereby larger entities, patterns, and regularities arise through interactions among smaller or simpler entities that themselves do not exhibit such properties.

¹⁶ From a phenomenological perspective the ethos of the preacher is attributed a great importance in the listeners' optics. Without being asked the informants used more than 20% of the interviews to talk about their perception of the preacher and whether they liked or disliked the preacher. The same focus on the preachers' person is found in similar empirical research project.

¹⁷ The Evangelical Lutheran understanding of preaching, as formulated in The Augsburg Confession, the primary confession of faith of the Lutheran Church, can give rise to a theological distinction between divine and human agency in preaching. The sermon and the entire worship are carried out by God, because "through the Word the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God."

the importance of the preachers' ethos as theologically problematic – even though the preachers by experience know their ethos is crucial for the preaching event.¹⁸

By the first glance this focus on the person speaking from the pulpit can be perceived as an unpleasant, nasty and intimidating overload of ministry. But the deeper analysis of the interviews revealed, as explained, that it is not the person per se which is interesting for the listeners, but the relationship. I will argue that it is a relief for the preacher that the emergent life within the preaching event is based on the relation depending on the participants and embedded in the entire worship situation – and not only on the preacher's personality.¹⁹

Contemporary North American homiletics, however, grants ethos an important role in the preaching event by way of the preacher's authentic testimony.²⁰ But the ways in which North American homiletics continues to rely upon the preacher's personality or rhetorical ability to engage the listeners in the preaching event is not sufficient to understand the surplus of meaning emerging in the sermon. Certainly preacher person is important in the production of meaning for the listener, but the ways in which North American homiletical theories indirectly tend to let the ownership of the meaning of the sermon remain on the pulpit is problematic. We can see steps moving away from this orientation in the New Homiletic, like in Other-wise preaching and in the emerging school of thought that sees preaching as conversation. However, it is a question if they do have a sufficiently developed eye for the emergent surplus of meaning in the sermon which cannot be predicted, controlled or conducted, as the ownership does not belong to the pulpit.²¹ Even though the listeners always will use their personal experiences to create meaning in the sermon the ownership does not belong to them either. The ownership of the sermon does not belong to the preacher, nor to the listeners, but emerge in the Third Room as the inter-subjective production of meaning.

The goal is still to be authentic and to have integrity and preach from personal faith experience as requested by churchgoers. By investing oneself honestly with respect for the churchgoer's different experiences and pre-understandings, the preacher can participate in creating the event in which the surplus of meaning emerges within the listeners' dialogue. This is not done by explaining how the churchgoers are to *understand* the Gospel – as the listening process is not primarily about understanding, but merely about creating new meaning incarnated in the lives of the listeners – but by showing what it means for the preacher him or herself *to trust* that the meaning will emerge in The Third Room.

¹⁸ The a dichotomy between empirical finding and theological understanding of preaching in Lutheran preaching is analyzed in an article, "Den empiriske fordring til homiletikken" in the Norwegian Journal *Tidsskrift for Praktisk teologi*, 2013

¹⁹ I have to confess I do not know how African, South American and Asian homileticians will address question of the preachers' ethos.

²⁰ For example Thomas G. Long, Anna Florence Carther, Robert Reid.

²¹ For example one of the significant exponents of North American Other-wise preaching, John McClure is right when he highlights the weak point in The New Homiletics' appeals to assumed common human experience as people have specific and individual experiences. He argues that in the collaborative sermon the preacher can avoid the hegemonic experience by identifying the real experiences within a face to face encounter with the listeners. But to operate with the notion of *hegemonic experience* presupposes that ownership of the production of meaning still belong to the pulpit which there is no evidence of in the empirical finding. John McClure, *Other-wise Preaching*, a postmodern ethic for homiletics.

For preachers it would be wonderful to have a recipe or a practical list of how to form the sermon rhetorically and theologically in order for the preacher to create the Third Room for the listeners. Indeed preachers can advantageously be well-educated theologians, experienced exegetes with knowledge of church history and traditions, trained systematic theologians, and with a good sense for interpreting the paradoxes of the present time. It is a plus to be rhetorical trained, in order to preach in a focused way, to communicate theological ideas clearly and maybe persuasively using analogies, illustrations, narratives and images and logical argumentation – all rhetorical skills well described in much contemporary homiletic. And of course there is inspiration to gain by having the listeners to penetrate ones theological understanding of the Gospel in a collaborative preaching workshop. And of course there are necessary exegetical and theological knowledge presupposed for all preachers – all essential and good tools for a preacher to learn.

However, in my interpretation of the preaching event from an empirical point of view the preacher is not holding the tool to create the Third Room – the preacher *is* the tool to be held. The paradox is the preacher is not the carpenter of the Third Room, but the Third Room is depended upon the preachers' willingness to serve as the tool. The tool is the servant of the Gospel. So what the preacher can do, in addition to acquire theologically and rhetorically skills, is to relinquish the ego and be obedient to God in order to serve as the tool.²²

Often preachers struggle so hard to be good preachers that they are afraid to fail, not being theologically profound and eloquent enough, not being able to fulfill the expectations of the congregation and not being accepted for the preaching voice he or she has to offer. Another paradox is that this fear may nourish the ego that stands in the way for serving as a tool for the Third Room. So knowing that the preacher him or herself is not the carpenter, but the tool, can remove some of the fear and anxiety for not being a good voice of the living Gospel – which, I argue, is a relief for the preacher.

The promise of preaching from a theological perspective

In a positivistic position language is understood as a tool to transport theological truths from the Bible to the listeners. Here the preacher easily is seen as the carpenter and theology is understood as ontology in which the preacher speaks independently of her or his own position and personality. The embedded communication theory is, as explained, the transfer model. The empirical position in contrast relates to an experience of the importance of the preacher's personal engagement and faith. Here the subjectivity of the preacher is participating in the preaching event, and language creates rather than transports meaning. Theology is more likely to be understood as epistemology, a process in which the preacher is participating as a tool – relaying on the 'big carpenter' in order to proclaim Gods' promise within the paradoxes of life.

In accordance with the empirical research the Gospel is to be understood as a network of potential meanings which has continuously to be incarnated anew. From this perspective the Gospel is

²² The Danish philosopher, Soeren Kierkegaards writes that the non-authentic preacher strives to be the master of Christianity rather than being its servant. The problem lies in humans desire to secure ourselves, rather than being obedience to God.

something dynamic and alive, and God is not a substantial and transcendent reality about which we can preach, external to ourselves, but a reality in which human beings – listeners as preachers – are always and already participating. The key word related to the promise of preaching is *participating* – of course we are not alone on the pulpit. When human beings participate in God, we are not only to be understood as autonomous and limited individuals, but as relational and related beings embedded in a situated context. So human beings cannot speak about God without already being or participating in God in a web of reciprocal relations.

The former South African archbishop Desmond Tutu describes the mutual relation between people with the African concept of ubuntu. He writes: "... We live in a network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creatures. In Africa, we call the recognition of our interdependence ubuntu [...] It is the essence of being human. It's about the fact that my humanity is caught up in and inextricably interwoven with your humanity."²³ The South African homiletician Johan Cilliers explain ubuntu this way: 'Ubuntu' rather defines the individual in terms of relationships. It represents a sort of web of reciprocal relations in which subject and object are indistinguishable. Therefore not 'I think, therefore I am', but rather 'I participate, therefore I am'."²⁴ This South African concept of ubuntu defines well how we are relational and related beings.

Homiletically, this concept of God implies that the preacher must regard herself as participating in God. It is not possible for the preacher to speak of or experience God as external to her own being. The preacher cannot stand outside his own existence pointing towards God as a transcendent truth, but she must talk about God from her experience of already being embedded in God. It is noteworthy that the description of human beings as embedded and participating in God is not identical with a direct access to God through the Gospel as an eternal truth. Instead, the Gospel is to be seen as dynamic words which constantly have to be interpreted by human beings in order to come alive. The preacher cannot speak of an evangelical reality without participating in the creation of this reality. The Gospel has to be incarnated again and again in the listeners' lives, and the preacher is participating in this process as a tool– and it is the master who decides how to use the tool.

Homiletically this implies that the preacher him- or herself is to be seen as a participant in the incarnation of the Gospel in the churchgoers' lives. Empirical analysis shows that it enhances churchgoers' interaction with the sermon when the preacher puts herself at stake, speaks from her heart and shares what the words of the Gospel do in her. The role of the preacher is as mentioned as an interlocutor and a theological reflector with her own interpretation of the text contributing – as one out of several voices – to churchgoers' production of meaning.

When the preacher's role is merely to offer his or her voice as co-authors for the churchgoers' own sermon discourses, it indirectly give rise the question of how we can most appropriately teach

²³ My translation from the Danish version of *God has a dream*, Desmond Tutu, 2004.

²⁴ Johan Cilliers: "In Search of Meaning between Ubuntu and Into: Perspectives on Preaching in Post-apartheid South Africa", in *Preaching. Does it make a Difference?* "Studia Homiletica" 7.

homiletics.²⁵ Like the preacher cannot transfer the meaning to the listeners the teacher cannot transfer the meaning to the students. Beside well-prepared and profound lectures in front of students in an auditorium how can we create a room for reflection for the students? I suggest that traditional homiletical teaching can benefit with an additional level which moves from *sermon formation* towards *preacher formation*. It is a question of how to best educate and train preachers in light of the Third Room in order to let the preacher create their own understanding – since they cannot be transferred from a lecturing teacher. Do you see, what I mean?

²⁵ I have been working with that question since it was raised by the North American homiletician, Charles Campbell, in response to my presentation of the first empirical findings at Societas Homiletica's biannual meeting in Wittenberg, August 2012.