Preaching Luke Through the Eyes of an Artist

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How does one preach the Gospel of Luke to a congregation that has “heard it all before”?

Presumed familiarity can pose a challenge for the preacher and teacher of Luke, particularly with regard to some of the most beloved parables of Jesus in Luke’s gospel. Church members may survey such familiar terrain with an air of “been there, done that.” One challenge, then, in teaching and preaching Luke, is in creating more distance and less familiarity with what people are convinced they already know.

Artists use the technique of defamiliarization to cause the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar way, helping to deepen or even challenge the perception of the familiar. To achieve this same effect as I preached through the Gospel of Luke, I invited my friend and fellow congregant Joel Phillips, a painter, to look with me at Luke’s stories and parables, helping me consider ways in which we might defamiliarize them for our congregation. Each week I sent my sermon notes to Joel, inviting him to think about ways in which we might present the material in a fresh (defamiliarized) way.

When I told Joel that I was entitling the series A Place at the Table, to highlight the Lucan themes of table hospitality and inclusion in the kingdom of God (Luke 5.29–32, 9.10–17, 14.12–14, 15.22–32, 19.1–10, 22.14–23, 24.30–35), he went to work. First, he suggested that we change the way we arranged the flexible seating in our auditorium for the series. Rather than having rows of slightly angled chairs facing the stage area, we created a semicircular arrangement, with all the chairs surrounding a central area on the floor of our auditorium. While such a seating arrangement would immediately defamiliarize our congregation, Joel had a greater purpose in mind. In that newly defined central area he set a table draped with tapestries and laden with candles, crosses, grapes and bread. This table evoked the rich and sumptuous banquet of the kingdom of God. Three aisles divided the semicircle into four slices, leading to the focal area where the table stood, drawing us in and welcoming us from every direction and walk of life. This arrangement sought to echo Luke’s thematic interest in showing how God’s salvation is available to all, including groups that in Jesus’ day were marginalized: the poor, “known” sinners, women, Gentiles, crooked tax-collectors, unworthy prodigals, even Samaritans.

On the first Sunday of the series, I reminded our congregation that, “When Jesus tells a parable in Luke about whom to invite to your table, he says we should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14.13). So today, we surround this table as a symbol of God’s gracious invitation to us and all the other messed-up sinners of the world. This table is extravagant and rich, as is God’s grace toward us. This table is a reminder of God’s excessive generosity to us all.”

Joel also went to work on a large painting, a beautiful 62” x 46” work entitled An Allegory of the Church. The painting, which echoes the sermon series theme, A Place at the Table, is of a human figure facing outward...
and offering bread and wine. However, the figure is not of Christ, or some traditional religious authority figure, but of a young, African-American woman. Joel’s defamiliarization combines the expected bread and wine with an unexpected woman of color who even in today’s social and religious world may face exclusion and discrimination. This painting was located on an easel at the front of the auditorium during several weeks of the sermon series. From her place on the easel, this woman served to challenge conventional thinking about who is welcome at the table of the kingdom of God, and more than that, who might serve as a host at the Lord’s Table. Later during the series, we used a picture of this painting on the cover of a forty-day Lenten devotional guide.

During the season of Advent, Joel created several paintings for the Sunday I preached on the Annunciation in Luke 1. Four paintings of Mary were arranged around the stage area, arousing curiosity as the congregation gathered for worship. During our call to worship, I offered these prompts for further reflection:

These paintings invite us to reflect on Mary, the servant of God, at various points in her faith journey. We see young Mary, who like many before her responded to God’s call by saying “Here am I.” We see prayerful Mary, saying to Gabriel, “Let it be to me according to your word.” We see pensive Mary, pondering and treasuring God’s mighty deeds in her heart, wondering what they might mean. We see older Mary, gathered perhaps in an upper room in Jerusalem with the disciples, waiting to be clothed with power from on high. Taken together, these paintings point us to the work of God the Father, for whom nothing is impossible.

During the sermon, I suggested that Luke presents Mary as the first disciple, one whose unconditional “yes” to God’s call aligns her with all who would later follow Jesus.

Working each week with an artist who thinks theologically had an unexpected effect on my sermon preparations. My self-image as a preacher was that of an exegete and Bible student, rather than that of a creative communicator. However, I found myself tapping into veins of creativity that I had long assumed were unavailable to me. If Joel was an artist who thought theologically, I was a Bible student and theologian who was learning to think artistically and visually.

When preparing to preach Luke 6.20–36, Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, I wrestled to find a way to challenge our comfortably middle-class congregation to see that we probably have more in common with the wealthy upon whom Jesus pronounces woes than with the poor whom he blesses. To do this, I drew from Peter Menzel’s book, Material World. Menzel created a pictorial journey through thirty countries on six continents to provide insight into how people around the world live. He found
families that were average for their countries in terms of wealth and earnings and photographed them with all their earthly belongings. Menzel wanted to “bring Westerners down from their high-rise tropical hotels and into the living rooms of hotel waitstaff.”

Armed with these images of families from around the world, we prepared a PowerPoint presentation that interspersed their pictures and their nation’s average annual income with verses from Luke 6:20–39. Eleven families earned less than $1,000 per year, ten earned between $1,000 and $10,000, and nine over $10,000. The United States was among the top three nations with the highest annual income. The interplay of these images and verses—many of which challenged our assumptions about who is blessed and not blessed—was powerful.

When I preached the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Joel’s son Sean Michael Phillips helped us prepare a moving PowerPoint presentation that concluded the sermon and heightened the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Sean Michael gathered a series of images that slowly alternated between old master paintings of the story of the Good Samaritan (typically of the Samaritan tending the Jewish traveler’s wounds or loading him on his donkey) and contemporary images of people from around the world: old and young, healthy and sick, light- and dark-skinned. The U2 song “One” played as the slides toggled between the old paintings and international faces. Key words from the song were placarded over the images: “One love,” “We get to share it,” “We’re one,” “But we’re not the same,” “We get to carry each other.” U2’s lyrics dovetailed beautifully with the various images of the Samaritan carrying the injured man on his donkey, then slowly faded into the multiethnic faces from around the world.

One love, One blood, One life, You got to do what you should
One life with each other, Sisters, Brothers
One life, But we’re not the same
We get to carry each other, Carry each other

The song called out to us, reminding us that to be a neighbor in the kingdom of God is to go and do as the merciful Samaritan went and did.

As I sought to see Luke’s narrative through the eyes of an artist, I discovered that defamiliarization could take a variety of forms, not all of them “artistic.” In preparing to preach on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18:9–17, I tapped into my love for science to create a PowerPoint presentation using a series of photographs of planet Earth taken from outer space. In this sermon on pride and humility, these images implicitly undermined our vain human pretensions of grandeur. The first image was titled “Earthrise” and was taken on December 24, 1968, by the crew of the Apollo 8 mission. The camera is poised over the surface of the moon and is looking toward a half-visible earth. Photographer Galen Rowell called this image “the most influential environmental photograph ever taken.” The second image, “Blue Marble,” was taken on December 7, 1972, during the Apollo 17 mission. It was the first clear image of the illuminated face of the earth and is one of the most widely distributed pictures in existence. The third image was taken on July 6, 1990, as the Voyager 1 spacecraft reached the edge of our solar system. Taken from nearly four billion miles away, the image caught a grainy “Pale Blue Dot” in the midst of a scattered light ray from the sun.

2. The images were of families from Albania, Argentina, Great Britain, Brazil, Bhutan, China, Cuba, Bosinia, Ethiopia, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Iceland, India, Mongolia, Israel, Japan, Mali, Mexico, Western Samoa, Iraq, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, the United States, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam.
Carl Sagan reflected on that image in a way that served as a powerful call to humility in the sermon that day.

Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization...every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam... Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.7

At various points during the Luke sermon series, Joel reminded me of the work of other artists within our congregation. On Easter Sunday, he invited another painter, Peg Pownall, to display her painting, Bound for Glory. Peg’s work is an abstract piece with colors and shapes that upon closer inspection bespeak Easter faith. A gold wing echoes the dazzling presence of angelic messengers at the empty tomb. A gray, round shape evokes the stone that was rolled away. The interplay of light and dark colors is suggestive of how the light of God pushes back the darkness of sin and death. Peg’s painting served as a fitting reminder to me that churches have a variety of members with gifts. Even two painters who share the same profession and faith will approach their craft in ways that are different yet distinctly meaningful and richly theological.

Working with professional artists has challenged the excellence with which I pursue the craft of preaching. When one views a finished painting, one might be tempted by the fluid and graceful aspects of its art to assume that the process of painting follows a relaxed, natural and effortless arc, like water flowing downhill. But Joel reminded me that great art is most often born of constant struggle and the refusal to settle for the easy and the obvious. He reminded me that all great art, like all great preaching, must be in touch with the deepest and most elemental truths about our shared humanity and life.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the serendipitous journey through the Gospel of Luke that I was privileged to share with someone who, while sharing my faith commitments, brought a completely different aesthetic sensitivity and way of listening to the text. Preachers and Bible teachers could benefit greatly from reading the scriptures and preparing sermons not only with artists but with a wide cross-section of their congregations and communities who can bring fresh eyes and ears to the message of the gospel. The defamiliarization that one experiences in observing closely to what others discern in scripture can both greatly enhance one’s humility and provide fresh and contemporary insights into the ancient message of Jesus of Nazareth.

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