

breathe and eat. No matter how bruising life has been, most of them, including the couple's young friends, hold on to the hope that people can live up to a promise of fidelity and love. God has made us for such a life. Therefore, even if the culture denies that sacred possibility through its daily images of sex and violence, the best desires of the human heart can be awakened by a word of truth.

Because I believe this, I am a preacher.

Because I believe this, I am sitting here in my study, praying and reflecting in the early morning. I look out the skylight and see that the moon is still in the crown of the great silver maple tree. Its slivered shape looks like the curve of some partially illuminated heart that is pumping light down through the vein-like branches of the tree to the roots, which extend beneath the foundation of my house from where they send up emanations to my attic study. I feel part of a great capillary system that circulates truth from heaven to the earth through the city about me and the city of books on my desk and the couple I will marry and the congregation who, if they are moved to pray, will complete the cycle of spiritual energy through their act of praise.

I turn to the homiletical city, looking for a resource to structure the flow of feeling that is animating my imagination so that I can shape my insights into a sermon for the wedding. I consider some of the marriage texts that have been used again and again at weddings: the opening chapters of Genesis, the wedding at Cana, Paul's hymn to love. I am eager to settle down and get the thing done.

## A Sample Rhetorical Sermon for the Print Generation

I turn on my word processor and decide that since I have only a few minutes for the homily, I will step directly into the theme in the first sentence.

*In a few moments, Catherine and Jonathan will repeat their vows: "I promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be your faithful and loving wife/husband for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live."*

Promise and covenant—what antique words these are to our ears. They sound like something we might find carved in Romanesque letters on a stone monument or written with indelible ink on vellum, bearing an official seal.

Promise and covenant—they are not the words of everyday speech. They are not the words we use during coffee break or on the street or talking across the fence with our neighbor.

Promise and covenant—these are sacred words. When a couple speaks them in a wedding service they set loose once again the voices of

*Abraham and Sarah;  
Moses and the prophets;  
the apostles and the martyrs.*

*They remind us that God has made a promise to us: to guide us, to support us, to love us, to hold us to account for how we live. And we have made a promise to God: to be faithful, to do justice, to show compassion, to witness to our faith in Jesus Christ.*

Promise and covenant—these are words that are deeper than feeling. That idea is hard for us to grasp. In our society, there is a tendency to reduce everything to what an individual feels. But feelings alone are an inadequate foundation for a marriage. If I feel I love you today, I may feel different tomorrow.

Promise and covenant do not change with our moods. When we promise and covenant, we make a commitment, a pledge, to be faithful partners to each other no matter what happens—for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.

Promise and covenant—for the rest of your lives remember these sacred words, these words rooted in the promises of God, these words that go deeper than feeling.

Remember them in the night when a child cries.

Remember them when bitter speech has passed between you.

Remember them when your bodies fail from illness or age.

Remember that you spoke these words to each other.

In the remembering, hear again the voice of One who loves you with an everlasting love and who will supply the grace and strength to keep the promise and covenant that you are making this day.

I stop and read the sermon off the screen of my word processor. I am not pleased with it. It sounds too talky for the generation of television viewers who will be present. The sermon depends on old rhetorical devices: the repetition of a phrase, allusions to the Bible, and an exhortation at the end. It is not that all of this is bad or wrong, but it lacks what television has conditioned the congregation to expect: immediacy, vividness, and a fast-paced plot.

For a minute I console myself that those qualities are antithetical to the message I am preaching, and

what I have on the screen is perfectly all right. I scan the homiletical city, thinking about where I might find justification for such a sermon. I turn to George A. Kennedy's work on classical rhetoric and read his summation of the six parts of a public speech from Cicero's *De Inventione*:

- the exordium: prepares the audience, makes them attentive and receptive
- the narration: sets out the basic case to be made
- the partition: a statement of agreements and disagreements with opponents
- the confirmation: we make our case
- the refutation: the falseness of opposing positions is shown
- the conclusion or peroration: a summary, inciting indignation against the opponents and winning sympathy for the speaker.<sup>3</sup>

I turn back to my sermon and note that almost all of Cicero's elements are present in my brief homily. I prepare the audience and set out the basic case in the opening paragraph. I make a case for promise and covenant, contrast it with opposing views from popular culture, and conclude with a peroration on the importance of remembering the vow. Perhaps I should tell the congregation that what they are about to hear is Ciceronian.

### The Stress of Biblical Illiteracy

But then I realize that they do not know who Cicero is. I will be happy if they catch my reference to "Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the prophets, the apostles and the martyrs." I can no longer assume

that biblical names are common knowledge among young people.

Last spring I was preaching to eight hundred Boy Scouts at a camp jamboree. I was drawing on stories from my own mountain climbing experience and from journey passages in the Bible. The Scouts were following me attentively (I could see it in their faces) until I happened to mention in passing "David and Goliath." It was simply a phrase to clarify some other part of my sermon. But I saw many faces go blank, saying to me: "Who are David and Goliath? You did not mention them before." So I had to make an instant detour in that sermon, working in the story of David and Goliath and then picking up where I had left off.

Now I worry that the same thing will happen at the wedding. I will speak the names "Abraham and Sarah" and look out at blank faces that are asking, "Who are they, relatives of the groom or the bride?"

Peter S. Hawkins, a relatively new inhabitant in my homiletical city, is right when he observes that "the whole theological frame of reference, concretely expressed in Scripture, that once provided the coherence for Western culture and imagination . . . does so no longer."<sup>4</sup> The rich use of biblical allusions, which earlier generations of preachers employed to give their sermons a holy resonance, is no longer available to me. There is a burden now on the preacher to carry the weight of the scriptural witness without help from the culture. I am feeling that burden right now in my study. And for a moment I grow resentful of mass culture and its loss of contact with what was good and true in the past.

Many articles have been written about burnout among the clergy. They usually address things like

time management and the stress on ministers' families. Not for a moment would I deny these realities. But I sometimes think the greater cause is the spiritual exhaustion that develops as ministers realize the enormous gap between the gospel and the culture, the incessant tide of images, fads, and fashions that threatens to wash away the church's witness.

### **Creating Sermons with Electronic Alphabet Noodles**

I sense that tide now as I read through my wedding homily. The message seems as insubstantial as the print on the screen of my word processor. Those phosphorescent words appear as nothing more than electronic alphabet noodles that I have flicked up from the darkness with the touch of a finger. How different from ancient days, when things were impressed in clay tablets or carved in stone. When Jeremiah proclaimed that the law would be cut on the heart (Jer. 31:31-34), his words must have branded the mind of the listeners. But now what are words? We do not cut, carve, or even write them. We process them. Words have become blips on the screen that vanish to blankness when the power is shut off. Words are the jingle that accompanies the commercial. Words are the fifteen-second sound byte that is all we hear from the candidate on the evening news.

Yet here I sit early in the morning, searching for words. The moon has moved out of the crown of the silver maple tree and is fading away. My eyes stare at the brightening blue of heaven, and the outward mysteries of dawn suffuse my imagination with a

deeper light that leads me to ask: What images complement the ideas I have presented in my rhetorical sermon?

If I were a television producer who wanted to show the principle of covenant in action, I would not be able to stand on the screen and repeat my sermon as it is. The young people would switch channels, and they will do the same inside themselves if all I do is gab about covenant at the wedding.

I reread my initial homily, this time asking myself every few sentences: How can I telecast what I have said rhetorically? A sermon begins to broadcast itself in my head, and my fingers strike the keyboard, casting electronic alphabet noodles onto the screen of my word processor.

### A Sample Visual Sermon for the Mass Media Generation

*I once met a couple who told me that every anniversary they donned their wedding clothes and had their picture taken in the living room of their house. They planned to do this throughout their life together and to collect the photographs in a single album.*

*As you, Catherine and Jonathan, stand before this congregation in your wedding clothes, I am remembering that other couple. I imagine them on their fifth anniversary, coming down to the living room for their annual picture. She is in her white gown, and he is wearing his three-piece suit and formal tie. They are waiting for their next door neighbor who has gone to get some extra flashcubes.*

*The first four years, they hired a professional photographer, but this has not been a good year for them financially. The husband lost his job. The wife is only able to get*

*part-time employment, and their second child is having medical problems.*

*Finally, their neighbor arrives. He positions them in front of the fireplace and suggests they hold hands, the way they did when they said their vows, the way you, Catherine and Jonathan, will do in a few minutes when you say yours.*

*While their friend fidgets with the focus, the wife notices the stuffing that is coming out of the sofa and wishes they had money to redo it. The husband sees their daughter's broken doll and thinks of one he saw in a shop window but could not afford.*

*Flash! "That's picture number one," says their friend.*

*While he steps back for another angle, the wife says to the husband, "Do you remember our vows? We memorized them."*

*They think a minute, then slowly repeat together: "I promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be your faithful and loving wife/husband [the two words sound at once] for better for worse, for richer for poorer. . . ."*

*Poorer. The word bursts like the flashcube on their friend's camera and highlights the stack of bills on the table beneath the phone and the calendar marked with doctor's appointments they cannot afford. A look leaps between them.*

*"We promised."*

*The camera flashes again.*

*"That will be a good one," exclaims their friend.*

*Next I picture the couple ten years later. Things are much better for them financially. The husband has a good job. The wife went back to school and has just taken an excellent position. The colonial love seats by the fireplace have been recovered in a quilted chintz. Each of the children has a ten-speed bicycle in the garage.*

*But the husband and wife have thrown acid words at each*

other. The second child, after all those trips to the doctor, is in trouble. Each partner has said to the other: "If you were not so preoccupied with your job and could give some time to the family, then things would be different."

On their fifteenth anniversary they come home and say they are too tired to get into the old wedding clothes. Then they remember that the photographer is coming in twenty minutes and has probably already left her studio and will charge them for the visit no matter what. So they trek up to the attic and throw themselves into the musty clothes, discovering that they have to suck in to get the zippers shut.

The doorbell rings.

The photographer comes in and takes control. "Come on now. Hold hands. A smile for the camera."

While the photographer clicks away, they get lost in the moment and begin to repeat the vow: "I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful wife/husband for better for worse. . . ."

Worse flashes as brightly as poorer did ten years before, and again the look leaps between them: "We promised."

Finally I picture their forty-seventh anniversary. They do not know whether they will make it to their fiftieth. He has had two heart attacks, and her hands are crooked with arthritis. Their granddaughter, herself engaged, is upstairs bringing down the old clothes. The dress has yellowed, and when the wife puts it on she tears a seam. The husband cannot get the trousers zippered, but if the picture is from the waist up and he buttons the coat, it will be all right.

He takes his wife's hands, her knuckles swollen and knobby, and out of their faltering bodies arises in a whisper the sacred pledge: "I do covenant before God and these witnesses to be your faithful and loving wife/husband for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do us part."

In sickness . . . until death. . . . Words that had slipped easily out of their mouths on their wedding day are now heavy with meaning.

"I've got to go upstairs for more film," says the granddaughter.

But they are not listening. In looking into each other's eyes, they see something more beautiful than the prize pictures in their anniversary album: the grace and the glory of a promise kept.

That is our prayer for you, Catherine and Jonathan, that for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part, you may know the grace and the glory of a promise kept. May God, who has made an everlasting covenant with us, grant you the strength to keep your covenant for a lifetime.

## Comparing the Two Sermons

I read the second sermon through from beginning to end, and begin nodding yes to what I have written. Behind my back is the city of homiletical wisdom that rises up on the table in the middle of my study. As I read, I have a strange feeling that the inhabitants of the homiletical city are looking out of their buildings, gazing over my shoulder at the print on my screen. Some are pleased with what I have written, and some wonder if it really is a sermon. I can almost hear them urging me to preach the first one instead.

I think I need to preach the second sermon, but the traditionalists in the homiletical city sound loudly in my heart. So I run both sermons off my printer, then place them side-by-side on the counter to compare their methods.

The second version of the sermon uses the flash of

a camera to make the transition from scene to scene. It is a cinemographic technique, which includes leaping through spans of time without the sustained development of a logical argument. The cumulative development of the sermon depends on tracing the life cycle and the evocations of feeling and insight awakened by observing the couple as they age.

The first version of the sermon keeps expanding the definition of the phrase "promise and covenant." The higher reliance on conceptualization leads to a more didactic and argumentative style: I build a case for the traditional marriage vow as opposed to simply feeling in love.

Yet, each sermon draws on the methods of the other. The second sermon relies on the rhetorical technique of repetition. The constant restatement of the wedding vow is the backbone of the sermon. And the conclusion even provides a small peroration of sorts: "May God, who has made an everlasting covenant with us, grant you the strength to keep your covenant for a lifetime."

In a similar fashion, the more rhetorical sermon uses many of the methods of imaginative theology. It employs images and scenes: words "carved in Romanesque letters on a stone monument," the child crying in the night, the bitter words, and the frailties of old age. In the rhetorical sermon, however, the images illustrate a principle that has already been announced. They are examples of the generalized truth in practice. But in the second sermon the images bear the meaning of the sermon rather than illustrate it. The result is a qualitative difference in the effect and tone of the two sermons.

When I finish comparing them, I still have not made up my mind about which to preach. I am

drawn to the second sermon, but I keep remembering my childhood experience of preaching, which continues to influence my ideas of how a sermon ought to sound. I grew up listening to sermons—excellent sermons—that followed in spirit, if not detail, Cicero's tight structure. I am not alone in this. A congregation member once told me that, as a child in confirmation class, he had to be prepared every Sunday afternoon to repeat to the pastor the three points of the morning sermon. The assignment never varied because the sermon structure never varied. We may laugh, but there was value in such a homiletic. It taught the people who listened week after week that it was possible, and indeed necessary, to think in an orderly way about the Christian faith.

There is still need for sharply reasoned preaching in the pulpit! In the light of that need, perhaps I should deliver the first sermon. The clear thought of its logical outline would counter our society's propensity to reduce everything to feeling. Choosing a classical style could be part of a strategy to present the gospel as an alternative to the dominant psychological consciousness of our culture.

### A Deeper Purpose for Imaginative Preaching

By the time I sit down to write the rest of this chapter, the wedding has come and gone. I preached the sermon that followed the principle of imaginative theology rather than Ciceronian rhetoric. While I was preaching, the mother of the bride turned pale.

Before the service, I had been certain of my choice. The story of the couple repeating their vows had