

- 1) Without any question, the most influential teacher of preaching alive today is Fred Craddock. Fred received his PhD in New Testament from a university in Germany, but he grew up listening to stories in Appalachia. His physical presence is unassuming, but when he stand to speak, you can hear a pin drop. He has written volumes, but the heart of his insights can be summarized in a single sentence which he announces in a distinctive Tennessee twang:
- The point of preaching is not to get something said, but to get something heard.*
- Getting something *said* and getting it *heard* are two different things.
(Too bad so many preachers don't seem to catch the distinction.)
- But that is easier said than done. How does a preacher help that happen? Robin Meyers, another preaching teacher (less well known, but still highly regarded) has written a book entitled: With Ears to Hear: Preaching as Self-Persuasion. His thesis is this: *No one ever convinces anyone of anything;*
all we can do is offer others resources that they can use to convince themselves.
- Both of these observations apply in other places than pulpits, of course, They say something important about persuasion:
that persuading is not pontificating, manipulating, bribing, coercing, or seducing. Persuading is a process of assisting others on an often long journey to a place where they can say,
not: *I give up—whatever you say!*
but: *Now I see what you're trying to say—*
you've given me a whole new way of hearing and seeing—and I find that convincing.
- 2) Over the last couple of weeks, as a would be professional persuader myself, I've been watching three attempts at persuasion—all spectacularly unsuccessful. I'm guessing they've caught your eye and ear as well:
- 1) The health care reform debate in congress
 - 2) The confirmation hearings of Sonya Sotomeyer
 - 3) The standoff between the Cambridge policeman and the Havard professor
- Whatever else you might say of these, this, at least, is clear:
A great deal has been *said* about *each*; much *less* has been *heard* about *any*.
And it's highly doubtful that *anybody* has convinced *anyone* of *anything*.
There *has* been a great deal of *self-persuading*—
what we sometimes call “rallying the troops” or “preaching to the choir”—to wit:
“We are *so* right—and here's the evidence to *prove* it”.
- But that is the *opposite* of what Robin Meyers means by “*self-persuasion*”.
It's one thing just to look for ways to reassert your *own* position
(and thus reassure *yourself* in the process) .
It's quite another thing to seek ways of helping others to arrive at a position for *themselves*.
- 3) While I've been following these failed persuasion efforts in our national life, I've also been listening as characters and authors in today's Scripture lessons take on various persuasion projects of their own:
- 1) Nathan—prophet to the king—trying to persuade the nation's chief executive that he's also the national sinner-in-chief
 - 2) An unknown letter writer—using the name of the apostle Paul—trying to persuade folks he may not even know that they need to give up an unhelpful understanding of *division* for a healthier meaning of that term.
 - 3) Jesus—as portrayed by John—attempting to convince a hungry crowd that he can give them something more important than endless servings of bread and fish.

4) Each of these persuaders faces daunting odds:

- How would you go about persuading the boss not just that he *is* wrong, but that he has *done* wrong—keeping your own head and neck connected, as you try not *just* to get your message *said*, but to get it *heard* (as Fred Craddock says)?
- How would you set out to persuade strangers living far away that their life in God has implications for their life with each other—and get some response besides, “Yeah, right, we knew *that* already!”
- How would you try to convince people with all kinds of hungers, that, in demanding what they *want*, they might completely miss what they most deeply *need*?

No pontificating, manipulating, bribing, coercing, or seducing allowed—just bringing faith, good sense, compassion, and rhetorical skill, into an attempt to offer life transforming realization for someone else.

That’s a tall order. (Aren’t you glad it’s *their* job, rather than *yours*?)

5) So how do these persuaders undertake their mission? Not easily, but with imagination:

- Nathan the prophet tells David the king a *story* about a poor man, a rich man, and a beloved lamb—owned by the poor man, but seized and slaughtered by the rich man.
- The author of Ephesians mounts an elaborate analogical *argument*, showing how, in a living organism, a *diversity of members* and a *division of labor* is absolutely *essential*, but only *possible* under the unifying influence of the body’s head.
- The Jesus whom John portrays picks up an image that is fundamental to Israel’s identity: “Bread from Heaven”. And he turns that image inside out.

In each case the persuaders employs a *metaphor* that invites the imagination of their listeners, proposing new ways of seeing things—ways that stretch, and challenge—even threaten.

But new ways of seeing that spell the difference between death and life.

And there *is no* pontificating, manipulating, bribing, coercing, or seducing—

Nathan, “Paul,” and Jesus give their listeners resources to convince themselves.

6) You can quibble with the metaphors each employs:

- “No, Nathan! David *is* a rich man, but Bathsheba is *not* a poor man, and Uriah was a warrior, not a little lamb.”
It’s just a metaphor—the story isn’t *really* true.
- “It’s all well and good,” “Paul,” to compare a community to a biological organism but the analogy doesn’t *really* apply—it’s *just* a metaphor.
We don’t need each other like arms and legs and livers do in *real* bodies.”
- “Come on Jesus, you don’t mean you’re *literal bread—real nourishment*.
That’s just a metaphor.”

7) But each of these persuaders has a ready answer to such challenges:

- Nathan will tell us that David has gotten so drunk by the delusions of his high office, that he has forgotten who he *really* is—a member of a community who has raped a more vulnerable member of that community and murdered another one. This is a metaphor that speaks the “real” truth—one that calls David out of his untruth.
- The author of Ephesus will tell us that the community to which he writes is still so wounded by the tortured history of divisiveness between Jew and Gentile, that they haven’t yet gotten clear on the cooperative division of labor which is absolutely essential for their survival as members of the Body of Christ. The “body” metaphor speaks in a way that calls forth a hearing of the deepest truth.
- Jesus in John’s Gospel says it plainly: Important though this meal or that may be, the God who is the source of life is the *real* bread that comes down from heaven. The only question is: can some of those listening possibly hear that, and find the metaphor convincing?

There is, you see, this common assumption that the literal is the real;
and the metaphorical, the figurative, while fascinating, is ultimately only fanciful.
If you and I *do* hold that assumption, we *do* need to be persuaded otherwise.

- 8) Well—how do these three persuaders actually make out? The results are mixed.
- David *is* convinced by Nathan’s story—and though David has set in motion a chain of events that will cost everyone dearly; in David’s convincing comes his salvation.
 - Except for a precious few, those listening to Jesus are *not* convinced by his “Bread from Heaven” image.
(We’ll hear more of that in the next three weeks, but, as a preacher myself, I take some comfort in the fact that even Jesus isn’t always successful at persuading. As those who are not always successful in persuading others for their own good, does that not make *you* feel a bit relieved as well?)
 - We really don’t know the success of the analogy employed by the author of Ephesians; but his ideas just do keep coming up as resources for our self-persuasion when we try to get it together as diverse members of a unified community with Christ as head.
- 9) Does this metaphorical resourcing for self-persuasion have any cash value in the health care debate—in the way we confirm supreme court judges—in the tragic truth about unresolved race relations opened up for us by the words and actions of a policeman, a professor, and a president?
Time will tell, there are no guarantees—but this, at least we can hope for:
- 1) That David’s eventual recognition *he* has taken wrongful advantage of power, can foster an analogous recognition in our lobby-driven culture where securing client advantage is the name of the game.
 - 2) That the realization of “many different members are necessary for a healthy body” can begin to more fully inform congressional confirmation hearings.
 - 3) That we will come to realize, as a nation, that addressing the deepest levels of hunger for racial justice, can, in fact, be helped along by acts like sharing mugs of beer; but that addressing this hunger will take lots more than beer and pretzels (just like more is required for soul nourishment than endless supplies of bread and fish).
- 10) *I AM the bread of life*, says Jesus, in John’s Gospel—
What, exactly does he mean by that?
Fortunately, we have three more weeks in which to find resources for our self-persuasion, and three different preachers—David, Robin, and Susan (Yes! She’ll soon be back!) to offer resources which we’ll be able to employ to convince ourselves.
But this at least, we can say today:
As we *come* to God’s table for the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, we need to do so with this realization *on* the table:
That, in saying “I am the bread of life,” Jesus *is* speaking in metaphor, and that this metaphor is more deeply true and necessary for our life than any literal truth of which you and I have ever been persuaded.