

## Preaching and the Deliberative Dialogue

My very first “experiment” with deliberative dialogue happened in the congregation in which I serve. I was taught how to facilitate a dialogue by Rev. Dr. Leah Schade and then I implemented her sermon-dialogue-sermon method. We had a small group that regularly met on Thursday afternoons, and was used to covering a wide variety of topics, so this was the group with which I chose to have a deliberative dialogue. For me, this made the invitation even easier as I could share that this was something a well-established ministry of the congregation was seeking to engage in together, and others were welcome to come as well.

Though the invitation was easier to make, having the dialogue with a small group that was already meeting created other opportunities. Though I could have created a fixed date up front, the group has a flexible model that allows it to spend more or less time with material as it engages the group. As it happened, the group wanted to have a dialogue on immigration after reading our denomination’s social statement around immigration. When I was planning everything out for this, I allotted two weeks to discuss the social statement and thought the dialogue would begin the week after that. As it turned out, it took us four weeks to engage the document and think through it together.

Overall, this two-week delay was not a big deal to people being able to attend the dialogue as we were able to communicate the date with the congregation clearly (as after the first session it was evident that we would need more than another week to work on the document). However, this did mean I had to plan for my sermon differently. Our congregation regularly uses the RCL for its readings on Sundays, and I didn’t want to change that practice for a couple of Sundays.

While I have heard from some colleagues that the RCL hampers their ability to deal with contemporary issues, my experience was just the opposite. Having a specific issue to speak about (and invite people into dialogue around) helped me see aspects of familiar texts in new ways. I sought to avoid *eisegesis* as much as possible, but within these polyvalent texts I consistently found expressions, shades of meaning, and ideas that I had largely ignored in favor of what I saw as the “main theme” for those texts. This process of using the sermon to invite people to the dialogue, and highlight how the issue we were going to discuss was already an issue the faith community had wrestled with together in the past, enriched my understanding of the texts and helped me draw out themes/ideas I had never seen before.

After the dialogue, I followed Rev. Dr. Schade’s model for a follow-up sermon, where I sought to share the highlights of our conversation, particularly focusing on our shared values. I noticed the same thing as noted above. The Holy Spirit must have been at work, because the lectionary readings seemed to fit right into what we were discussing, and helped us connect the story of what happened at our local church with the story of God’s people throughout time. This helped people not only engage the issue at hand, but see how we were truly connected to this body of Christ across time and space.

In addition to seeing our connection to the larger church, this follow-up sermon also gave me the opportunity to connect the values that came out of our small-group conversation with the core

values of our congregation. I think this really helped people who were not able to come to the discussion see/feel a connection to both the dialogue and the issue it discussed.

As is likely evident, I found the sermon-dialogue-sermon method to be a powerful way to engage a congregation, and myself, in an issue and to help us process together how we might think about (and maybe even respond) to an issue from our faith perspective. Suddenly, we were seeing how people of God have been called to engage this issue before and now we, seeking to be faithful people of God, are being called to engage this issue now. The mission statement of the congregation I serve is “Celebrate and Share Christ’s Love.” This was our goal as we engaged in dialogue, and this was the ultimate goal of our approach to our next steps. How might we respond to the issues of the world in ways that celebrate and share the love of Christ? How might we touch those impacted by these issues (and how might our own lives) be touched by this love in life-giving and life-transforming ways? These were the questions we wrestled with during our time together, and I hope you can experience the rewarding process of wrestling with such questions together too!